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A Fleetway magazine

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D. H. LAWRENCE

the

WHEN they came on to the shoulder of the hill, and looked down on to the mill and the millpond, she said, "I will not come down with you—I will go home."

"Not come down to tea!" he exclaimed, full of reproach and amazement. "Why, what will they say?"

"No, I won't come down—let me say farewell—'jamque Vale! Do you remember how Eurydice sank back into Hell?"

"But," he stammered, "you must come down to tea—how can I tell them? Why won't you come?"

She answered him in Latin, with two lines from Virgil. As she watched him, she pitied his helplessness, and gave him a last cut as she said, very softly and tenderly, "It wouldn't be fair to Meg."

He stood looking at her; his face was coloured only by the grey-brown tan; his eyes, the dark, self-mistrustful eyes of the family, were darker than ever, dilated with misery of helplessness; and she was infinitely pitiful. She wanted to cry in her yearning.

"Shall we go into the wood for a few minutes?" she said in a low tremulous voice as they turned aside.

The wood was high and warm. Along the ridings the forget-me-nots were knee deep, stretching, glimmering into the distance like the Milky Way through the night. They left the tall, flower-tangled paths to go in among the bluebells, breaking through the close-pressed flowers and ferns till they came to an oak which had fallen across the hazels, where they sat half screened. The hyacinths drooped magnificently with an overweight of purple, or they stood pale and erect, like unripe ears of purple corn. Heavy bees swung down in a blunder of extravagance among the purple flowers. They were intoxicated even with the sight of so

April Argosy opens with the English woods in spring: pages from Lawrence's first novel, The White Peacock, written in his early twenties. The book is filled with a wild, heady awareness of beauty—snowdrops, wood anemones, violets, a thrush's nest—everything is new, real. tense in impact as on the day he first saw it.

forbidden apple

much blue. The sound of their hearty, wanton humming came clear upon the solemn boom of the wind overhead. The sight of their clinging, clambering riot gave satisfaction to the soul. A rosy campion flower caught the sun and shone out. An elm sent down a shower of flesh-tinted sheaths upon them.

"If there were fauns and hamadryads!" she said softly, turning to him to soothe his misery. She took his cap from his head, ruffled his hair, saying, "If you were a faun, I would put guelder roses round your hair and make you look Bacchanalian."

She left her hand lying on his knee, and looked up at the sky. Its blue looked pale and green in comparison with the purple tide ebbing about the wood. The clouds rose up like towers, and something had touched them into beauty and poised them up among the winds. The clouds passed on, and the pool of sky was clear.

"Look," she said, "how we are netted down—boughs with knots of green buds. If we were free on the winds! But I'm glad we're not."

She turned suddenly to him, and with the same movement she gave him her hand, and he clasped it in both his. "I'm glad we're netted down here; if we were free in the winds—Ah!"

She laughed a peculiar little laugh, catching her breath.

"Look," she said, "it's a palace, with the ash trunks smooth like a girl's arm, and the elm columns, ribbed and bossed and fretted, with the great steel shafts of beech all rising up to hold an embroidered care-cloth over us; and every thread of the care-cloth vibrates with music for us, and the little broidered birds sing; and the hazel bushes fling green spray round us, and the honeysuckle leans down to pour out scent over us. Look at the

harvest of bluebells—ripened for us! Listen to the bee, sounding among all the organ-play—if he sounded exultant for us!"

She looked at him, with tears coming up into her eyes, and a little, winsome, wistful smile hovering round her mouth. He was very pale, and dared not look at her. She put her hand in his, leaning softly against him. He watched, as if fascinated, a young thrush with full pale breast who hopped near to look at them—glancing with quick, shining eyes.

"The clouds are going on again," said Lettie.

"Look at that cloud face—see—gazing right up into the sky. The lips are opening—he is telling us something. Now the form is slipping away—it's gone—come, we must go too."

"No," he cried, "don't go—don't go away."

Her tenderness made her calm. She replied in a voice perfect in restrained sadness and resignation.

"No, my dear, no. The threads of my life were untwined; they drifted about like floating threads of gossamer; and you didn't put out your hand to take them and twist them up into the chord with yours. Now another has caught them up, and the chord of my life is being twisted, and I cannot wrench it free and untwine it again—I can't. I am not strong enough. Besides, you have twisted another thread far and tight into your chord; could you get free?"

"Tell me what to do—yes, if you tell me."

"I can't tell you—so let me go."

"No, Lettie," he pleaded, with terror and humility. "No, Lettie; don't go. What should I do with my life? Nobody would love you like I do—and what should I do with my love for you?—hate it and fear it, because it's too much for me?"

She turned and kissed him gratefully. He then took her in a long, passionate embrace, mouth to mouth. In the end it had so wearied her that she could only wait in his arms till he was too tired to hold her.

PROPER SAILOR'S BIRD

"Aarrghk," she said lovingly,
and nibbled his ear

BY SUSAN COOPER

MY GREAT-UNCLE DAN was a sailor, and when he was too old to be a sailor he was a fisherman.

He sailed in square-rigged ships, as second mate, to exotic lands far away from Wales; and once he brought home a parrot called Poll, bright green with long red feathers in her tail. They shut her outside on the balcony in her cage every Sunday morning, to air; until one day the minister came knocking on the door to complain to my great-grandmother because Poll was singing sea shanties that came ringing through the chapel window when he got up to preach.

"I would not mind, Mrs. Jenkins," said the minister, sitting stiff upright in his prickly black jacket and frowning terribly over his cup of tea, "if they were suitable songs. But profane they are, Mrs. Jenkins, and not fit for the house of God, or anywhere else for that matter."

So after that they kept Poll indoors on Sundays and she sulked, and sometimes swore in Spanish.

"Never a bad word has she uttered in this house," said Great-Grandmother indignantly to Great-Uncle Dan, when next he came home from sea. "Not Welsh or English, at any rate. If I did not respect that Mr. Thomas I would say he was hearing it in his head. A sensible bird she is, and a great consolation to me."

The parrot looked solemnly at Great-Uncle Dan out of her beady black eyes, and said not a word.

He grinned a little, took her out of her cage, and put her on his shoulder, where she sat nibbling gently at his ear and purring in her throat like a cat.

"Sensible bird she is indeed, Mam," he said, eyes as solemn as the parrot's. "I tell you the song she sang. It was one day at sea, a rough old day, and a sheet snapped so that the staysail came falling down like the wrath of God. And we had

to get it back up again quicker than you can think. Well, there we were, hauling away with sweat dripping, *heave*, and *heave*, knowing we were drifting inshore all the time. But for all our straining, it hardly budged an inch.

"And then Poll out with her song. Put the beat on every *heave* she did, proper sailor's bird, and we all took it up with her and the sail went up like glass. I tell you, Mam, if it wasn't for this parrot I wouldn't be here now."

"Well," said Great-Grandmother, "since it is Tuesday, and Mr. Thomas not preaching across the chapel, how did the song go?"

"Only fit for sailors, Mam," Dan said. Then he looked round at Polly, unconcernedly preening one green wing.

"Well," he said, "I sing you the first verse, then."

And he sang, in the big rolling bass-baritone that was the pride of the village choirmaster at eisteddfodau when he was home between voyages.

We're four jolly sailormen come home from the sea,
Bill Bailey, Will Weatherall, Jem Johnson, and me;
But wherever we go now no sight shall we see
Like the night when we boarded the Spanish lady.

And perhaps it would have been all right, left there at that, though a bit dubious all the same for a still day in a North Wales village. But Poll cocked up her head where she sat on Dan's shoulder, and as soon as he had finished she went on. In her shrill cracked voice, keeping time like a metronome, she croaked with fearful clarity through all the other five verses of the song, more outrageous at every verse.

When the song stopped, Dan flapped Great-Grandmother with a towel where she lay moaning in the big oak rocking-chair.

"Daniel," she said, in a voice more terrible than the minister's, when the blush had faded from her cheeks, "we must never hear those words again. Mr. Thomas was right and God forgive me for doubting him. No more singing from that bird or I shall wring her neck, I promise you. Daro, boy, you have brought the Devil to the village, what will people think?"

Dan looked sideways at Poll.

"Aarrghk," said the parrot lovingly, into his ear.

"Polly cariad," he said, not without regret, "a credit to me you are. But we never sing again, see?"

"That's right, Dan bach," said Great-Grandmother in relief.

Poll said not a word.

Great-Uncle Dan was fifty-five when he came home from sea for good. Great-Grandmother hung his second mate's certificate

over the piano in the parlour, and he bought himself a small boat for fishing, like his father and his father's father and the fathers of practically everyone else.

The fishermen in our village do not catch many fish. In the mornings they lean in a blue-jerseyed line on the grey slate harbour wall, and talk about the sea. In the afternoons they sometimes go rowing slow out into the estuary in their little creaking boats, and catch a few plaice; but not very often.

In the evenings they lean in a blue-jerseyed line on the grey slate harbour wall, and talk about the sea.

Great-Uncle Dan was always in the middle of the line. He and the parrot were inseparable; she sat constantly on his shoulder, a bright green splash in the navy-blue group. But still she never sang.

There she sat, late one summer afternoon, on Dan's shoulder, among a disgruntled quartet of fishermen slumped on the wall with the sweet creosote smell of rotting nets round them. It had been a bad day.

"Something has happened to the water," said Ianto Richards gloomily, his tufted grey beard wagging on the big face that was tough and brown as a coconut. "Go out when I was a boy, and you could scoop fish out with a bucket. Go out today, rowing up and down for hours like a twp, and what do you get? Eleven mouldy flatties, and not worth tuppence any of them. More profit now if we spent ten minutes up the Maestwy after dark."

"Cae dy geg, Ianto Richards," said Evan Evans Small quickly, darting his head round like a weasel. He was the only little man amongst the big rolling fishermen, shrivelled inside his broad reefer jacket like a dry piece of seaweed. "Keep your great voice down, man. Do you want to get us all to Aberystwyth in the courts?"

They all made more money poaching salmon from the river in the valley than ever they did fishing in the sea. But nobody was supposed to know; though everybody did.

"No courts for us, boy," said Great-Uncle Dan innocently. "Who would mind eleven mouldy flatties, now?"

"More than flatties they will be minding if you bring that bloody bird of yours along at night again," said Evan sourly.

"Aye," said Ianto. "There I am, just getting the stakes up, and she lets out a noise like a steam-whistle that every bailey in Carmarthenshire could hear with his head under the pillow."

"Most noise was you splashing, boy," Dan said, grinning, "when you fell over. Like an old pig in a wallow."

"Well," said Ianto, "you leave old Poll at home tonight.

Enough grey hairs in my beard already without adding more. That squawk, Iesu mawr, it went through my head like a chopper."

"Fair play now," said Dan. "She was warning us. Those old baileys were there before she made a sound. Heard them myself I did, behind the hedge, but I thought it was rats. Poll got better ears than us, and better brains too."

"Aarrghk," said the parrot, and Evan nearly overbalanced on the wall. "That's right, Dan bach. That's right, Dan."

"*Visitor!*" came a stage-whisper from the other side of the group, and there was suddenly a new, brisker atmosphere on the harbour wall.

But it was only Colonel Collins, and everyone relaxed again. There was no impressing Colonel Collins, the jerking emaciated Englishman who was spending the summer there salmon-fishing; he was too busy always impressing them with some grievance of his own.

"Bore da, Colonel Collins," they said politely.

Thin, upright, brown from the sun of a dozen forgotten countries in the East, Colonel Collins stood before them prodding angrily at the loose grey slates of the wall with the stick on which he never, never leaned.

"There ought to be a notice!" he cried, the clipped, martial monotone shaking with rage.

They looked at him, lazily.

"Notice, Colonel bach?" said Ianto paternally. "What notice is that, then?"

"A notice, a notice," cried the colonel testily. "About the tides. Good God, how you chaps escape having a drowning here every week beats me. Have you no idea of the danger down there?"

He gesticulated with his stick towards the river, where the water looped and rolled within itself in the incoming tide.

"Danger?" Dan said, unmoving, regarding the Englishman without love from beneath brows that bristled in bleached curls like a barbed-wire fence. He was still sailor enough to suspect a soldier on sight. "No danger there. Harmless old river she is, wouldn't hurt a fly."

The colonel snorted. "Perhaps you have never noticed," he said coldly, "but the tide that comes round the point below here is enough to carry a man away in thirty seconds. Yesterday I went out in a boat. Your boat," he said accusingly to Evan. Evan smiled weakly. "And when I tried to row back against the tide, I couldn't reach the harbour. The current round that point there is terrible. It was a miracle I wasn't drowned.

Why, as it was I lost an oar. Of course," he added with fine scorn, " since it was raining, none of you were about."

" Duw, Duw," Evan said mournfully. " Expensive things, oars."

" No doubt," said the colonel curtly. " I suggest your council should foot the bill. It might teach them to put up some sort of warning."

" What? " Disbelief spread slowly over Evan's small, wrinkled face. " You not going to pay for my oar? "

" Fair play now, Colonel," Ianto said mildly. " What's lost should be found or paid for, isn't it? "

The colonel snorted, very English. " No, dammit, I'm not paying for your oar. Don't you realise I might have been taken right out to sea? "

" Nobody else ever had trouble there," Dan said softly.

" Never been a notice up before," Ianto said, leaning massive and implacable against the wall.

Evan, the outrage of his loss suddenly dawning on him, turned pink in the face and began to mew like a young gull. " Cheating me you are, and the hire of the boat not paid for yet, either. But you won't get away with it, Colonel Collins, not so easy as that. Look down the street there, I will show you. Police Constable Lewis coming this way, look, I will have the law on you quick as quick."

" Have the law on me by all means—" the colonel began.

But Dan was down from his seat on the wall, Poll lurching and squawking a protest on his shoulder, and he hissed urgently at Evan, " Keep him away, twpyn, what are you trying to do? Don't want Lewis Police near us—" But at once the village policeman was with them, fifty yards eaten up quick in a dreadful purposeful tread.

He came straight up to Dan, pointing a finger like a banana at him; frowning solemnly in the shadow of the splendid upright helmet, ignoring the fluttering Evan.

" Ah, Daniel Jenkins, I have been wanting a word with you. Looking for you at home I was just now. A little matter of salmon fishing, if you can call it fishing, without any licence. Good idea I think if you come along with me now."

" Salmon? " said Dan, all innocence. " No, no, boy, you got it all wrong. Flatties we been catching this morning, look here at them, miserable specimens too."

" No good, Dan." P.C. Lewis stood solid as a pillar, his shiny silver buttons glinting in the sun. " Got you this time, I have. Shouldn't have taken that bird with you last night; the baileys heard her squawk half a mile away. And no good

telling me she was out fishing on her own. She got no licence, any more than you."

"Salmon, salmon, salmon!" Evan danced up and down. "All you ever think about is bloody fish licences, Lewis Police, and barefaced robbery going on under your nose. This man here, he is robbing me. Lost an oar through clumsiness and refuses to pay. How am I to earn a living with only one oar?"

"Never mind oars now," Lewis Police began to rumble; but the colonel, stung into action, brushed Evan aside and brandished his stick in the air.

"Call yourself a policeman?" he cried. "Do you realise that this river of yours is a death-trap, and that nowhere is there a warning notice up, or even a lifebelt on a post? Criminal neglect, yes, criminal! I shall write to the chief constable at once, tonight!"

Horrified, hurt surprise spread gradually over P.C. Lewis' large serious face. He wore the shocked expression of a cow who has been suddenly and unreasonably kicked while peacefully chewing the cud.

"What's all this, then?" he inquired helplessly.

"Criminal neglect, I say!" Colonel Collins was working himself into a fine righteous military rage. "Not a notice anywhere in the place!" He spluttered with incoherent fury.

"Gentleman went for a row," Ianto said.

"Lost one of my oars," Evan put in quickly.

"Says the tide was too strong for him to row past the point," said another fisherman. A small interested crowd was drifting from all sides towards the harbour wall.

"Says we're all murderers," Ianto added cheerfully. "But especially you."

A great and troubling struggle began in the slow mind of Police Constable Thomas Lewis. He glanced uncertainly at Dan. Seven years he had been on the promotion list now, but always just missed his stripes. To capture Daniel Jenkins, ringleader of the poaching gang who stripped the chief constable's stream of salmon every summer, would surely have made him sergeant at last.

Then he met the popping angry eyes of Colonel Collins. Very hot on the tourist trade the chief constable was; fond of talking about amenities for visitors to Wales.

Police Constable Lewis suddenly felt very warm. He took off his helmet and scratched his curly head.

"Now look," he began.

"No excuses!" The colonel was out for blood. "I shall put in a report about this straight away."

P.C. Lewis began to bleat unhappily. "But nothing happened; what you going to complain about?"

"Nothing! A murderous tide race nearly kills me, and you call it nothing! Good God, man, have you no brain at all?"

The crowd of fishermen rippled with enjoyment. No one ever spoke to Lewis Police like this. It was lovely.

Then Dan said, loud and aggrieved, "No call to insult our policeman, Colonel. You watch yourself before you go making complaints."

The crowd looked at him in amazement. What was the matter with Dan, supporting the enemy?

"Lot of nonsense, all this about the tides." He drew himself up and waggled his bristly white eyebrows at Colonel Collins, frowning horribly. "Best police force in Wales, we got, and never neglected anything that needed doing proper."

"Now look here, Dan, you keep out of this." Suspicion began to dawn in Police Constable Lewis' dazed brain.

But Dan had a gleam in his eye. "No, Lewis, fair play, I'll have no man saying these things without cause. Slander, it is!"

"Don't be a fool, man!" the colonel shouted furiously.

P.C. Lewis moaned softly.

Dan's shoulders heaved, even the peak of his cap jutting pugnaciously. "No, Colonel!" His voice boomed out over the still harbour, over the breathless heads. "Only one thing wrong—that you don't know how to row. I tell you, there is not a child in this village who could not bring a boat in through that tide. And indeed any man with the use of his limbs, no matter how old. Done it myself, I have, a dozen times!"

"That's right, Dan bach!" cried the parrot from his shoulder, spurred to shrill excitement by the raised voices, and hopping in a green and scarlet flurry from leg to leg. "That's right, Dan!"

The colonel smiled: a nasty, thin smile.

"All right then," he hissed, at Poll as much as at Dan. "*Go and do it now!*"

Dan stood stock still in the centre of the crowd, and heard the sudden awful silence of the afternoon. Nobody stirred; the waves murmured gently down on the shore, and a lone gull cried.

Then he saw Lewis Police, gaping vacantly but with the dawning of hope on his broad simple brow.

Dan stuck out his chin level with his cap. "Very well," he said firmly. "I'll show you!"

And he took Poll from his shoulder, thrust her into Ianto's

startled arms, swung round and marched off down the slipway to the beach, where the lowest of the boats was beginning to shift and sway now in the rising tide. The crowd flocked after him.

"What you think you're doing?" Ianto pounded along unhappily, ducking Poll's attempts to peck his ear.

"Going for a row." Dan marched with grim determination towards the nearest dinghy.

"But you'll never beat that tide race, boy!"

"You heard what we said. Nobody ever failed yet. True, isn't it?"

"No. Well, yes. Nobody ever failed, indeed. But nobody ever tried, either."

"Well, somebody going to try now," Dan said. He fitted the rowlocks into their sockets in the first boat he reached, then looked at it in wonder.

"Well now," he said. "Look at that. My own boat, it is. Haven't seen her for a month. Give a hand now, Evan Small." He heaved at the boat, and she crunched protestingly over the slates of the beach.

"O Dan bach!" Evan danced agitatedly in front of him, almost in tears. "Don't do it, boy. Give yourself some terrible injury, you will. Not worth it, just to spite that old man."

Dan clambered aboard the swaying boat, pushed back his cap so that a white forelock fell rakishly over one eye, and grinned at them. "Listen," he said. "More sense in this than you think. Proving that old colonel wrong is saving Lewis Police trouble, isn't it? Grateful he will be, won't he? And then no more talk about salmon and hearing noises up the river, see?"

"Don't tell me," Ianto said sceptically. "You were just talking for the sake of talk. Only thing got you into this mess was that damn bird." He glared out of the corner of his eye at Poll.

"There you are, then," Dan said. "I always told you she had more brain than the lot of us." And he fitted the oars into the rowlocks and rowed out into the main stream, moving easily with the tide towards the point.

The crowd clustered thick now along the wall. All the fishermen were out, and most of their wives, gazing down at Dan's broad navy-blue back. They buzzed with professional approval.

"Good pair of shoulders he got on him, even at his age."

"Proper old tub that boat is. He should have more of a keel."

"Don't be twp, boy, too much weight then."

"Not a chance!" the colonel crowed, waiting for victory. "He won't make it. Murderous bit of water. Not a chance! Fellow'll probably drown himself, that'll show you. As soon as this farce is over—" he wagged his stick at P.C. Lewis—"I am off to write to the chief constable."

But hope had brought back a little of the policeman's confidence. "You wait a bit, sir," he said with some severity. "If he can't row it, same as you, then fair complaint, and you say what you like. But if he can, then you take back what you said."

"And pay for my oar," Evan said.

"Bah!" said the colonel. "Not a chance!"

Dan reached the point, and leaned on one oar to pull the boat round. Slowly, unwillingly, twitching in the pull of the current, the stubby bows came round to face the harbour and the incoming tide. The boat rocked; Dan dug in both oars, and the water churned over their blades.

The crowd held its breath, and leaned forward over the wall.

"Duw, look at it," said Ianto gloomily to Evan. "Running six knots if it's an inch. All he can do to hold the old boat still, let alone go forward."

Evan wailed unhappily, clutching Dan's discarded jacket to his breast like a talisman. "Oh, Dan, come on, boy, pull hard!"

The fishermen all began to shout.

"Brysiwch, Dan, pull away now!"

"Put your back into it, Dan!"

With immense effort, Dan swept back his oars and dipped them. In—out—in—out.

Gradually the crowd on the wall fell silent, willing the boat to move, willing their own strength into Dan's arms to beat the tide.

Panting, Dan glanced over his shoulder, and for a moment his back drooped. Then he gritted his teeth and began to pull even harder.

The boat crept on, the current eddying round it thick as oil.

"He'll do it!" Ianto whispered hoarsely. "He'll do it yet!" He crouched over the wall and clenched his fists in speechless concentration. In the silence they could hear the squeak of Dan's rowlocks, and the creak of the oars.

But the boat barely moved. In ten minutes Dan had only covered as many yards, and the tide was still sweeping in.

The parrot moved restlessly on Ianto's shoulder, and flapped one wing against his ear. He looked round at her. "Aye, you sit quiet there," he said bitterly. "Pity you didn't sit quiet before, you stupid bird."

Down on the river Dan was blowing like a winded cart-horse. Inexorably the tide swept past his oars. He rested for a moment, shaking the sweat out of his eyes, and the boat began to drift gently backwards. Evan squeaked in horror and hid his face in his hands; the watching crowd caught its breath in a great gusty gulp.

Hastily Dan dipped his oars again, and pulled with all his strength. But he had lost the rhythm that had got him even that far, and now the boat did not move forward at all, but remained lurching in the same place.

"I told you so!" cried the colonel, delighted, to Lewis Police.

The crowd of fishermen shuddered with excitement along the wall; voices began to mutter and then to shout down to the puffing stationary Dan. Evan rocked to and fro, moaning gently. Ianto watched in taut silence, suppressing the tension, until it suddenly burst the bounds of his lungs.

"Oh, heave, Dan!" he cried, in a great agonised bellow which echoed round the harbour.

"*Heave!*"

The parrot on his shoulder cocked her ear and listened. Somewhere in her green head old memories began to stir.

The cries rang out to the boat.

"Come on, Dan!"

"Put your back into it, boyo!"

But over them all Ianto boomed desperately, "Heave! Heave!" and gradually they all fell silent for that one great bass despairing shout.

And then all at once they heard another voice join in.

We're four jolly sailormen come home from the sea,
Bill Bailey, Will Weatherall, Jem Johnson, and me.

Over the water the voice rang, shrill, cracked, discordant, a horrible noise; but every word clear, and stressed like the crack of a whip.

The parrot had begun to sing.

Stunned by surprise, Ianto stopped with his mouth open. But Poll chanted on, unfaltering, in her shrill inhuman voice, with an unwavering beat. Ianto swore afterwards that she was keeping time on his shoulder with her foot.

The crowd above the river saw Dan's oars gradually begin to rise and fall in time with the song, with a growing strengthening rhythm. And slowly the boat began to move forward against the tide, the waves curling at her bow. With a great strained grin on his face, Dan rowed towards the harbour, and the crowd

listened, glassy-eyed with delight and disbelief, as Poll squawked unfaltering through the five outrageous verses of her song.

She reached the last appalling line as the bow of Dan's boat crunched on the beach. A huge roar of joy went up, and the crowd broke from their intent stillness and rushed down towards him, Ianto in the forefront with Poll slithering and cackling on his shoulder.

They shouldered Dan and carried him triumphantly up the slope, red in the face, wet with sweat, and still puffing like a walrus, but beaming as if nothing better could ever happen in the world.

Police Constable Lewis patted him on the back without a word and went away up the street, his helmet in his hand, his sergeant's stripes wheeling away in the air with the gulls.

The colonel, shaking his head and looking slightly dazed, took out his wallet and began conferring with Evan about the price of oars.

"Oh, well done, well done, Dan!" cried Ianto.

Great-Uncle Dan took Poll from him, set her on his own shoulder and stroked the back of her neck.

"Aarrghk," said the parrot lovingly, and nibbled his ear.

"Ah," he said, grinning all over his face. "Proper sailor's bird."

© Susan Cooper 1961

"Anyone for a game of goodminton?"

An ALFRED HITCHCOCK Choice . . .

It couldn't possibly happen

By
ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

MARSH and the fat man, Mr. Venner, were the only occupants on the fifth floor of the hotel. They were strangers by birth, profession, and choice. And it wasn't until Marsh's third day in the Italian city that anything like a social approach occurred between them.

The lift was an open-grilled affair, and Marsh had entered and was reaching for the down-button when Mr. Venner issued from his room just opposite the lift and raised a hand, calling, " Wait, please."

The man carefully locked his door, even tested the knob after the bolt had been shot, while Marsh waited rather impatiently. Mr. Venner joined him and they started cranking downwards together.

They stood in stony apathy past the fourth floor; then Marsh became aware of the little man's stare. He turned quizzically, and Mr. Venner smiled, but his eyes did not participate in the smile.

" You are Mr. Marsh? The American painter? " he asked.

" Well, magazine illustrator," Marsh offered.

Mr. Venner nodded, allowed his eyes to remain on Marsh a moment longer, then turned deliberately away. Marsh shrugged and matched the other's silence. But something bothered him.

He had the feeling that he'd just been catalogued and he wondered why.

That was Monday morning. Late on Tuesday evening, four or five minutes before midnight, Marsh returned to the hotel feeling saturated in local colour. The night porter was nodding in his chair. Marsh didn't disturb him. He entered the lift and went on up to the fifth floor.

The first thing that attracted his attention as he stepped into the hall was Mr. Venner's door. It was partly open, a light was on, and a sound—an almost animal sound, suggestive of pain—came from it.

Marsh hesitated in the shadows, wondering. "Mr. Venner?" he called tentatively. "Anything wrong, Mr. Venner?"

A decided pause . . . then, "That you, Mr. Marsh? Come in—slowly."

Marsh edged the door open with his hand, framing himself in the jamb.

Mr. Venner was seated at a table, facing the door. He was pointing a snub-nosed pistol at Marsh. His mouth smiled and he lowered the weapon. "Forgive me, Mr. Marsh. I expected someone else."

Marsh nodded. He illustrated too much melodrama to believe in it. "Really, Mr. Venner—" he began.

"Close the door, please. Quickly," Venner ordered. "There's a man, with a silencer on his gun, loose somewhere in the hotel."

Again Marsh hesitated.

Venner raised the gun to back his request. "*Please.*"

Crackpot, Marsh decided. He closed the door, but remained near it.

Venner pointed to an oilskin packet by his left hand. "This is what he's after. He's an agent . . . like me. I was going to sell out to the Americans. He caught me in the alley as I was coming home. Shot me in the back. I couldn't get to the downstairs phone and there's none up here. You will have to phone the American military—"

Marsh came to the table, frowning. He stared at the fat man with awe. "*Shot you?*" he said.

"Yes. I'm through. Take the packet . . . you're an American . . . it . . ." He laughed and a bright dab of blood appeared on his lower lip. "The money doesn't matter now . . . I won't be needing it . . . just as well, I suppose, that your countrymen have this information as—" He dropped the gun and put his hand inside his coat as pain passed over his face.

"Hurry . . . take the packet, phone the American military police. Use the lift . . . the man with the silencer will be using the stairs, checking each floor—"

And then his head knocked down on the table. Dead.

Marsh didn't move. He stared. The incongruity of talking to a stranger in a sordid hotel room one moment, and staring at the same stranger dead the next, was too much for him. He straightened up and started for the door. Then checked himself, remembering the packet. He returned to the table and picked up the oilskin packet, weighing it in his hand. The gun he ignored. He had always hated violence.

Walking along the corridor, he felt like a somnambulist in a

nightmare. He kept telling himself that what he had just experienced couldn't possibly have happened. He needed a drink.

He unlocked his door, went in turning on the light, and walked to the chest of drawers near the open window. His travelling flask was empty. He swore and stood by the cold, night-blowing window, rubbing his face. He stared down at the balcony, seeing it, yet not seeing it.

It was all too fantastic. It hadn't happened . . . had it? He looked at the oilskin packet. That was real. The dead man had been real. But cloak-and-dagger in a European city? Agents fighting in a dark alley? Secret documents? A silencer going *plat!* at midnight? He made an exasperated gesture with his hands and turned to the door. Only one way to settle it. Call the American authorities, turn the matter over to their military police.

He still needed that drink when the lift let him out in the foyer, so he roused the night porter with a call. "Sénd the boy for a bottle of brandy, will you? Put it on my bill."

Then he entered the phone booth and closed the door.

He left the booth five minutes later, wearing an expression of perplexed dissatisfaction. He felt his pockets, then realised he was out of cigarettes. Did the night porter smoke? No, sorry. Suddenly, he felt that he must have a cigarette. All right, he'd go up to his room again and get some, then try another phone call.

Venner's door was still closed. Marsh hurried down the hall and opened his own. He stepped inside and stopped cold, sensing something wrong, something that went ominously beyond the obviously torn-up condition of his room. The door slammed behind him. He spun round, facing a tall, bleak-faced man who watched him with eyes that were not capable of compassion.

The man poked a long-barrelled pistol in Marsh's stomach.

"Get by the bed. I'll ask, you'll answer. Where are the papers?"

Marsh's first reaction was anger. All the hocus-pocus and gunpointing was beginning to tell on his nerves. Then he noticed the round addition on the end of the pistol. The man with the silencer.

Everything went dead inside him. "What papers?" he faltered.

The man sneered. "Don't play that way, Yank. I found Venner in his room, dead. The documents were gone. Your lights were on, your overcoat on the bed, only you were gone. You're the only other occupant on this floor. Venner handed over the papers to you before he died. *Give.*"

"Look," Marsh cried, "I'm just an artist. Not a secret agent!"

The man grinned. "You just made a mistake, Yank. I was only guessing till you spoke. How did you know I thought you were a secret agent?"

"Well—well, I—I guessed—I mean I assumed—" Marsh stumbled.

The man shook his head. "Won't do. Won't do at all. You're allowed only one mistake in this game, and you just made yours. *Give.*"

Marsh moved away a step or two, aimlessly, trying to think, to stall. "If I don't?"

"Don't be a fool. This little toy of mine makes no more noise than a man spitting in a cellar. I'll shoot you, then take what I want from you."

Marsh looked at him. "And if I do?"

Out of delicacy, the man's grin twisted down to a wry smile.

"I'm very sorry about this—but you must know how it is. I mean, the inadvisability of leaving witnesses and all that. I'm really sorry."

But he wasn't. Marsh could see from the man's eyes that he was anticipating the tug of the trigger. Marsh nodded. "I thought it would be like that."

"I mentioned I was sorry, didn't I?"

It was inconceivable to Marsh that thirty-one years of civilised living were suddenly going to end instantly and violently. And yet the savage eyes of the agent promised that was so.

Marsh pushed a trembling hand over his face and looked absently at the window. "What hurts so much," he muttered, "is that I've blundered myself into this."

"How's that?"

"I mean, I was with Venner when he died from a bullet. He gave me the papers, warned me, and then I did nothing to protect myself. I came up here for cigarettes, even though he told me you were on the loose. Walked out of here leaving my window wide open so you could come in from the balcony. If I'd only thought to protect myself a little—"

"You did worse than that. You *must* have been in a daze. You left your door wide open. I didn't have to use your balcony. But don't feel bad; locked window or locked door, I can open either in ten seconds." He held out his free hand. "Hate to press you like this, but I am in a bit of a rush."

Marsh looked at the hand, at the silencer, at the man's eyes.

A knock sounded at the door.

The man leapt at Marsh, the silencer in front of him.

"Who is it?" he hissed. "Who are you expecting?"

Marsh took a deep breath. "This is going to be rather

embarrassing. When I left my room I went downstairs and phoned the American authorities. I imagine it's their men at the door."

The agent looked around desperately, fixed his eyes on the window. He shoved the pistol into Marsh's side.

"The documents—right now. I'm leaving by the window."

Marsh's hand was shaking so much that he could hardly draw the oilskin package from his jacket pocket. "Don't shoot," he advised. "I'll make a bargain: don't shoot, and I promise I'll stall them. You can go along the balcony to Venner's room and escape down the stairs."

The agent hesitated, then grabbed the packet.

"Word of an Englishman?" he asked.

At another time Marsh would have been inclined to laugh at that. Now he only nodded. "Yes."

The agent sprang to the window, threw one leg over the sill, watching Marsh. "If you fail me, you'll get the first bullet. You understand? Even if they get me, *I'll shoot you first.*"

The knock sounded again. Marsh nodded.

The man hauled his other leg over the sill and dropped from sight. A long second later a shrill scream knifed sharp and clean into the night. The door snapped open and the boy with the brandy bottle gaped at Marsh. "Lord, what was that"?

Marsh sagged against the wall. "A burglar," he said finally. "He thought you were the police. He stepped out on the balcony to escape."

The boy's face was incredulous. "But—but he *couldn't do that!*"

Marsh didn't want to talk about it. He nodded and pushed by the boy, going into the hall. "I know, but the thing is he thought he could."

He didn't want to think about the way the agent had died, but it had to be faced. He would have to go down to the street and remove the documents from the body, then phone the American authorities. He hadn't been able to get through to them the first time he'd tried.

He felt very bad about the whole affair, but he hadn't lied to the man with the silencer, at least not completely. There was a balcony, the only one on that side of the building, and it was below Marsh's window. But it didn't belong to his room. It belonged to the Giocondo Suite, and the Giocondo Suite was on the second floor.

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Another ALFRED HITCHCOCK CHOICE
in next month's ARGOSY

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Messing about in Boats

"Nice? It's the ONLY thing," said the Water Rat solemnly.

KENNETH GRAHAME

The Skipper and the Passenger went sailing hand in hand,
They wept like anything because they could not see the land.
"If we knew where we were," said they,
"Then sailing would be grand."
The Skipper said the co-sines were very much ajar,
And the angles of the tangents were horizontular.
"It's really very odd," said he,
"We don't know where we are!"

Said Passenger to Skipper, "It's very clear to me
Our course is ESW by N, as nearly as may be,
With deviation for a drink,
Of stronger stuff than tea . . ."
And when they lifted up their eyes, the land appeared ahead,
They thought that it was Berry; it was really Durlestone Head!
It didn't matter in the least,
They went to Poole instead.

ANON

Broadside On

Next day it blew half a gale and we rammed a large cruiser moored by the bank, while tacking against wind. From inside came a fearful shriek and an anxious Kensington voice inquired, "Are you all right, Mother?" We sheered off on the other tack, came about and promptly rammed her again. This time the bowsprit went through a cabin window causing a further hysterical outburst from Mother. As a veteran of the Broads I always carry a sheaf of accident reports for the insurance company, and we climbed aboard to sort things out. Mother was bawling imprecations from below, but young Kensington came up and sulkily agreed to fill in a form. There was some difficulty over

the section "Whom Do You Consider Responsible For The Accident?" Kensington simply wrote down the name of our boat, so I retaliated by writing in capital letters: ACT OF GOD.

After the holiday was over I received a letter from his boatyard addressed to "Mr. God." I don't think that sort of thing is very funny.

MICHAEL GREEN, *Captains Courageous*

When Grandmamma fell off the boat,
And couldn't swim (and wouldn't float),
Matilda just stood by and smiled.
I almost could have slapped the child.

HARRY GRAHAM

Non-starters

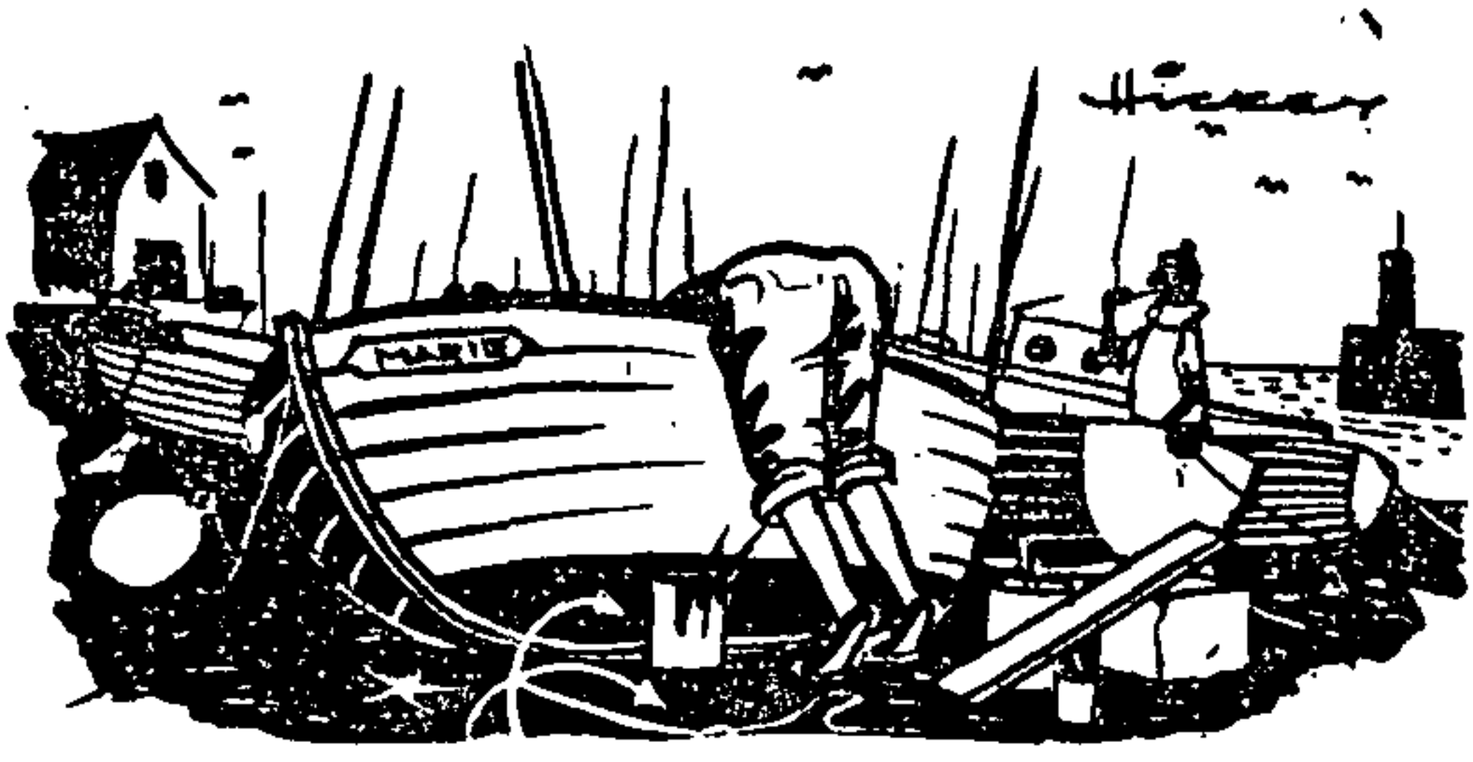
During a period of economic depression earlier in the century two elderly bachelors of the neighbourhood decided to go to America. Plenty of work over there, plenty of wages, and every man welcome, was what they had heard.

"But how do we go there?" asked Bert, the younger.

"Why, in a boat, of course," said George, the elder.

So without saying where they were going they borrowed a fishing-punt, and with the little they had of possessions they set off down-stream. After a couple of miles they came to Northmoor and six miles after that they came to Eynsham where because they passed under instead of over the bridge no toll was demanded of them, and then with the wind behind them they reached Abingdon. But overnight the wind turned against them and it was two hard days' rowing before they sighted Reading. That night George said to Bert: "I've had enough of this voyaging," he said. "You're young," he said, "and you may go on to America if you like, but I'm going back to England."

ROBERT GIBBINGS, *Till I End My Song*



Indian Rope Trick

My friend Harblow and I had our commissioning leave at Naini Tal, which is 6,000 feet up in the Himalayan foothills. And when you can tear yourself away from looking at Nanda Devi and those terrible pure peaks, there is, or was, a yachting club on a dreamlike green lake. The great thing to do was to be taken on as crew. The novices, nearly all second-lieutenants, would hang about to be chosen by the skippers; it was rather like a slave market, and, indeed, Harblow looked as much like a Circassian as is possible for a person from Wimbledon. Actually our skippers looked just as disreputable, but they turned out to be a brigadier and a major-general.

At Naini Tal Harblow and I acquired the kind of familiarity with sailing that a pianola player has with a piano, or rather that an organ-blower has with Bach. Even as crew it is possible to get very confused, especially when there is a strong wind. When the boat is turning one has to loosen one rope and tighten another *simultaneously*, and at Harblow's first crisis he let the sail down instead.

Nevertheless, later he actually persuaded his major-general to let him take the tiller, and he thus became, as far as I know, the only yachtsman who has ever sunk a buoy.

PAUL JENNINGS, *Even Oddlier*

Bark-ed Shins

What's the use of postcards and what's the use of snaps?
Some may keep their diaries and others mark their maps
To show where they've been to, and put them on the shelves—
John and Pam and Jennifer are marked on themselves.

So Pam can roll her sock down and say, "That *was when*
I was in the fishing-boat alone with the men!"
John rubs his knuckle in his eye and mutters, "*That*
Was when the boom was 'booming,' and it knocked me flat!
It did look funny,
All black and blue and red.
Bet any money
I was nearly dead!"
Till middle of September
The bruise will still be green
To help him to remember
The boats and where he's been.

BARBARA TODD, *Maps*

A TAXI TO SOLITUDE

I remembered her hands holding the shells
on the grey-and-white lap of her dress

BY NICHOLAS DEE

THIS is not a gay story. It is the record of a day last summer, the saddest, strangest day of my whole life; if I live three time as long again, there will never be another like it.

I am a Forestry Commission inspector. I had broken some bones in a felling accident, and was convalescent, staying with my uncle who keeps The Vine pub at Hemingwell. I slept, and strolled about, and ate apples, and drove my uncle's taxi for him as it was the grape-harvest. Uncle William's vine—there was a real one growing all over his pub and a vineyard behind it—was of the most serious importance to him. At vintage time the whole neighbourhood was invited up to tread his grapes, with free meals at the pub. Normal village life, not to mention licensing hours, went by the board and saturnalia—solid, happy, selfsatisfied English saturnalia—took over for a few days.

In this pretty village—lilac trees, weatherboarded houses, virginia creeper turning to fire in the first autumn dews—I was content enough, cruising the massive taxi, exchanging ideas with the neighbours, when they were not too drunk to listen, feeling the hot, hop-picking sun gradually penetrate into my bones. No hint of tragedy.

The taxi was a 1910 Ramsay-Lavrock, a lovely work of art. It was built on ambitious lines with heavy wooden bodywork; a high-perched chassis approached not just by one or two steps but a whole flight; wide, cushioned leather seats like the older-fashioned station-waiting-room benches; and great brass lamps big as portholes.

Behind the passenger seats was a luggage compartment, long and wide enough to carry a sofa, its floor padded by a kind of mattress, also leather-upholstered. Over the whole vehicle was slung a fringed waterproof canopy.

I describe the taxi in such detail because it was important in what followed. I loved that absurd conveyance—if I could have

persuaded Uncle William to part with it, and if there had been space to keep it, I'd have it now. It was big, reassuring, solid, handsome, and snug, just the way an old mum should be. You could have lived in that taxi.

One evening, as dusk was beginning to fall, I was down at the station yard waiting for stray custom. Lined up with the modern coupés and convertibles, the taxi looked like St. Paul's among concrete office blocks.

There were four trains a day, two up, two down, and sometimes a passenger would decide to leave the train and sniff the air of Hemingwell. On this occasion a woman came out of the station yard and stood looking round. Then she walked towards me.

She was younger than I had thought at first; the way she moved, so elegant, so composed, had misled me. She had a cloud of dark hair and a compassionate mouth; her eyes, in the shadowy light, were only a blur.

"Is this a taxi?" she asked. "Can you take me to the hospital?"

Something about her voice stirred me unaccountably. I stalled, wanting her to speak again. "Hemingwell hospital, do you mean?"

There was only one in the neighbourhood. It stood at the top of the hill, on the main road, high above the village. You could see it for miles.

"Yes."

She put hardly any voice into the breathed monosyllable but again it moved me strangely.

"Certainly," I said. I opened the heavy, brass-fitted door and she climbed up.

"I feel like the Queen of Sheba in here," she said, laughing.

A lamp hung inside the taxi, a kind of chandelier, and by its light she caught sight of my face in the doorway. Her eyes widened in astonishment.

"Why—it's *you*!"

"It's you!"

We stared at one another incredulously.

"I didn't know you drove a taxi—that wasn't what you said—" she began, and hesitated.

"I don't, normally. I'm helping my uncle, he keeps the pub here. I didn't know you were coming south; you never said . . ."

"South! Not very far south!"

"Compared with where I met you last, it is. But how extraordinary, meeting you again like this—"

"I've so often thought about you."

"Not so often as I've thought about *you*. A dozen times I've cursed myself for not getting your address. I wondered if a letter to Carsluith post office would find you."

"Carsluith? Why there?" She sounded puzzled.

"Wasn't that the name of the place where we met? Yes, I'm sure it was. Carsluith, on the strand."

"You're very absent-minded." She was amused again, but there was a twinge of disappointment underneath. "It wasn't Carsluith at all. I've never heard of the place. It was at the Wertheims' party last month."

"The Wertheims?"

"Yes, of course it was." Her voice was indulgent. "Don't you remember? We sat all evening in the corner behind the castor-oil plant, and you told me about your painting."

"Painting? I don't paint." More and more bewildered, I climbed on to the box, slid back the glass pane that separated us, and set the stately taxi in motion. We freewheeled through the main street of Hemingwell and turned up a side lane. "I don't paint, and I don't know any people called Wertheim."

"Oh, don't be so crazy!" She sounded quite angry now. "Of course you do! It was at their party, at their flat in Guildford Street."

"I've never been there in my life."

"Is this some stupid joke? You're pulling my leg, aren't you?" There was a note of pleading, almost of panic in her voice.

"Truly I'm not. Don't be angry," I begged. I couldn't bear that she should be angry with me. "Look, I can prove it. When was this party? What date?"

"It was on a Thursday. Let me think. Three weeks, a month ago—it must have been the 13th of last month. Yes, and I know it was, because I had a dentist appointment the same day. See, it's in my diary."

I halted the taxi at the top of a wooded rise where the road ran out between hopfields and there was a view of the hospital across the valley. She showed me a tiny green leather-bound diary with the words *Dentist*, *Wertheim*, written in for the 13th. Once again, as with her voice, the handwriting gave me a queer familiar pang. I stared at the opposite hillside with dimmed eyes, seeing but not seeing the lights of the fast traffic slide beadwise along the main road.

"But you see I can't have been there! On the 13th of last month I was in Scotland. In fact that might have been the very day—yes, it was actually the day—I know. Because I had to ring my uncle in the evening—"

"The very day that what?"

I had stopped speaking, unnerved by the strangeness of it.

"Why, the day that *I* was meeting *you*."

"What *do* you mean?"

"I met you in Scotland. On the beach at Carsluith."

"But I've never been to Scotland—or not since I was a child, anyway."

"It was on the beach. At this little place, Carsluith. I was walking back across the sand, and I met you. You were wearing a grey-and-white checked dress, and a blue belt. You stopped me and asked if I had seen some children and a dog. You were looking after them for a friend and you were worried because they had gone off on their own. The current there is dangerous on the ebb and they weren't allowed to bathe. I walked back with you and we found them playing on the sand; they were all right, so we sat and talked."

"It must have been someone else," she said.

"How could it be? It was you. I'd pick you from a million."

"I've never been there."

"It was you."

"What is my name?" she said.

"Helen."

From the strangeness of the look she gave me I knew I was right. It had to be Helen. I couldn't have made a mistake. Helen was the only name for her.

"And mine?"

"I—I don't know. You didn't tell me. You said no one ever used it. But that was at this party—at the Wertheims'." Her voice rose. "You *must* have been there! You must be pulling my leg."

"There's an easy way to find out," I suggested. "Ring up the Wertheims and ask if I was there. There's a callbox by the hospital."

I told her my name—the name my friends never use. We were silent for the rest of the drive, half angry with each other, half afraid. I pulled up by the callbox, thrust a hand into my pocket, and offered her a palm full of change. She shook her head, jumped down decisively, and crossed to the booth. While she stood in it, waiting for her number, I watched her, illuminated as she was by the overhead light, with the queerest feeling I'd ever had. She seemed so familiar, so unaccountably dear—and yet all the evidence showed that we'd never met before.

She came out looking white and shaken.

"Well? What did they say?"

"Julius Wertheim says I spent the whole evening talking to

his sister and his old aunt. He says he has never heard of you." Her eyes met mine with a kind of piteous accusation.

"Well at least I wasn't gatecrashing," I said, trying to be jaunty.

A bell began to ring inside the hospital.

"Oh goodness! That must be the end of visiting hours, and I haven't even been in. What shall I do?"

"Better skip it this time," I suggested. "Who were you visiting?"

"A girl I've never met. I belong to a society of Friends, and we arrange to visit lonely people in hospital with no relatives of their own."

"Well if you've never met her she won't miss one evening."

"No, I suppose not," she said doubtfully. "I must make sure of going tomorrow. Can I stay down here somewhere?"

"Why yes. My uncle will put you up at The Vine. But now get back in and let me go on driving you round. We've got nothing sorted yet."

"I don't see how we ever can," she said in a despairing voice. I helped her up and she sat beside me on the front seat. "I remember you and you remember me, but we seem to be remembering two different people, not each other at all."

Quite suddenly she began to cry, staring down at her clenched hands in her lap. Tears rolled one after another down her cheeks and she made no effort to stop them.

I hesitated, longing to put an arm round her, uncertain, so odd was the link between us, how this would be taken.

"It sounds stupid," she brought out presently between sobs, "but I'm going to miss you so! At that party—we seemed—we seemed—to have established something so close between us. And now to find that the whole thing was a dream—didn't exist—"

"But *I* exist," I said. "And you exist."

She drew a deep, quivering sigh, and after a moment pulled out a handkerchief and wiped her eyes. The old taxi rumbled its way down the hospital drive. Gentle autumn rain whispered on the broad yellowing leaves of the chestnuts, which turned and flashed in the light of our carriage lamps. Showers of drops pattered on the canopy over our heads.

"You said you were a painter. You talked about visual harmonics. What *do* you do, if you don't paint?"

"I have a job. Unexciting. Perhaps I'll start painting some day, who knows?"

"What did *I* talk about? On that beach of yours?"

"Shells," I said. "And the sea. You told me all the different

names of the shells—whelks, limpets, cowries—I'd never heard them before."

A dreadful pang of loss shook me as I remembered her hands holding the shells on the grey-and-white lap of her dress, and her peaceful, happy voice—" The children love these because of their pink linings. The science of shells is called conchology, did you know? . . ."

I looked at the girl by my side. She was frowning, the puzzled crease between her brows was outlined by the yellow light from the lamps.

" I don't know anything about shells," she said wearily. " It can't really have been either of us, can it? And yet it seems so unfair. As if it had been *meant* for us. If only it had been."

" Why ' if only '? "

" Because then," she said simply, " we should neither of us ever have to be lonely again."

" Are we lonely? "

" You know we are."

" But, Helen—"

She looked at me doubtfully.

" Well? "

" This is us now."

" Is it? Can we be sure? Can we be sure that in a month's time we shan't meet again and be strangers somewhere else? "

" Then we should waste no time now," I said.

Her shadowed eyes in the uncertain light raised so questioningly, the sight of her face close to mine, ached in me like a hunger. I took her in my arms. She resisted a moment, then relaxed against me with a small, forlorn sigh. Her mouth turned to mine.

The old cab rested tranquilly in the shelter of a hazel copse.

" I wanted to do this in Scotland," I told her after a while. " But I didn't dare."

" I did too. At the party. I hoped you'd offer to take me home. But you just got up and went quickly out as if you'd suddenly remembered something. You didn't even say good-bye. You won't do that again, will you? " She tightened her clasp on my hand. " What did I do? In Scotland? "

" One of the children, the smallest one, cut his foot and you said you must take him home. You waved good-bye and called that we'd probably meet next day. I looked and looked for you every day after that, asked people where you lived, but nobody knew."

Her lips travelled over my face like dividers over a familiar map.

"Shall I tell you something? You have a scar on your neck, below your ear. It's too dark to see it now, but I noticed it at the party."

"Yes," I said. "I got it when I was a child."

Her straying fingers found the scar.

"It really is you?"

"Who else could it be?"

After that we were silent for a long time.

Presently I said, "We should be going back and booking you a room at my uncle's pub. You must be hungry and tired."

"I don't want to," she said obstinately. "I'd much rather stay here. I don't want to meet other people, ordinary people."

"We can hardly stay in this wood for ever."

"I wish we could. I've never lived in a dream before. I wish there weren't such things as houses and streets and front doors and—and tables and chairs and knives and forks."

"We can do without the knives and forks a while longer," I said, remembering. "I've a loaf and some cheese and a bottle of wine in the back. I was planning to knock off after a couple of fares and eat my supper down in the hopfields."

The rain had stopped momentarily. I took out one of the wide leather cushions from the passenger seat, and we ate under a hazel bush, in the golden glimmer of the lamps, nibbling cheese and breaking the bread in our fingers, drinking wine from the silver flower-cup which was one of the lavish appointments of that wonderful taxi.

"It's like being at home, isn't it?'' said Helen, looking up at the scalloped edge of canopy against the ragged leaf-shadows. She leaned back against a mossy stump and I put my head in her lap.

"Perhaps this is our home. We could stay here. We could sleep in the cab."

After a while the pattering on the leaves began again, and so we moved into the luggage compartment and there, covered with a rug, went to sleep in one another's arms, our dreams accompanied by the rain's drip and whisper on the oiled silk over our heads.

"I wonder who you really are?" murmured Helen, just before her eyes closed. "The you of Scotland or the you of London?"

"Both. Perhaps there are four people in the cab, not two."

It didn't seem like four. In the leafy dark, close together, we seemed not even like two people, but like one.

Next morning was golden and September-hot. We finished the loaf for breakfast with handfuls of blackberries.

"I hate having to go back to the real world."

"Even for coffee and a shave?"

"Even for champagne and a turkish bath."

Hemingwell was hardly the real world. When at length we did cruise the taxi down the leafswept cobbles to The Vine pub we found wine-treading in full swing. We received absent-minded smiles and courteous vague greetings from my preoccupied uncle and his neighbours as they hurried about with jugs and basins, pestles and mortars.

The housekeeper showed Helen a room and gave us some lunch. We wandered in the vineyard and the hopfields, and threw raisins to my uncle's flashing pheasants in their pens.

Dusk overtook us before we expected it, and with an armful of roses for the girl in the hospital we went out to the taxi in The Vine courtyard. It welcomed us like an old nurse in an Elizabethan play, spacious and gracious and knowing.

During the day we had not talked much. We held hands—Helen's were small and cool—and I found an old signet ring that she could wear on her first finger. We were silent on the drive to the hospital.

Near the turn into the main road I said, "I'll wait for you outside. Do you think we might go up to the hazel wood again afterwards?"

And Helen answered, rather oddly, I thought, "Twice? Don't you think twice in a lifetime might be too much to expect?"

At that moment the Mercedes hit us, hurtling round the bend, out of control, at over seventy miles an hour.

I was thrown clear. Helen was not.

Help, of course, came quickly. We were only a few yards from the hospital gates, and the crash could have been heard from there to Brighton. They were on the spot with stretchers almost before the wheels of the upside-down Mercedes stopped turning. The taxi was matchwood.

As soon as I came to after they had set my broken legs I asked about Helen.

A nurse called a sister, who called a doctor.

"Are you a friend?" he asked. He was a grey-haired man, kind and tired and troubled.

"I'm going to marry her."

"Oh. Oh I see." His distress deepened. "I—I have to tell you that she is not expected to recover consciousness. And, in a way, it's merciful. There's nothing we can do for her except deaden the pain."

I looked at him numbly for a while, and then said, "Can I be with her?"

They carried me in. She was lying in a screened side-ward. Someone had rescued the roses, not much battered, and put them

in a white jug on the windowsill. Helen lay very quietly, her head turned on one side as if she were sléeping.

I sat there in a sling-chair and listened to the hospital noises ebb and flow. I wondered about the girl Helen had been going to visit—did she know what had happened? I wondered about the driver of the Mercedes, and how my uncle was getting on with his vintage.

At half past three she moved a hand slowly from under the masking sheet, and whispered, as if to herself, "Children . . . love these ones with pink linings. Did you know . . . the science of shells . . . was called conchology?"

Five minutes later she died without, as they had prophesied, having recovered consciousness. I sat on beside her for the rest of the night, though they wanted to move me.

When they finally allow me out of hospital I am going to learn painting. There's a picture I have, somehow, to get on to canvas while it is still fresh in my memory: Portrait of a Girl With Shells.

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LOVE IN THE GREEN GLEN

Love, meet me in the green glen,
  Beside the tall elm tree,
Where the sweet briar smells so sweet agen;
  There come with me,
    Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me at the sunset
  Down in the green glen,
Where we've often met
  By hawthorn tree and foxes' den,
    Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me in the green glen,
  By sweet briar bushes there;
Meet me by your own sen,
  Where the wild thyme blossoms fair.
    Meet me in the green glen.

Meet me by the sweet briar,
  By the mole hill swelling there;
Where the West glows like a fire
  God's crimson bed is there.
    Meet me in the green glen.

JOHN CLARE

Wild Honey

BY BRIAN CLEEVE

THE SINGING lifted in the darkness. Clear and cool and easy as water springing from a rock. From beside the thorn trees by the dry river bed, a quarter of a mile outside the little dorp. Stealing on the night wind, soft as a ghost, a thief, a lover. Into the little houses with their corrugated iron roofs and raw, heavy furniture.

In the whitewashed police post Sergeant du Toit heard, and his square block of a head came up and his hard mouth tightened. In van Niekerk's store Hendrik the storekeeper heard, his hands half lifted to the shelves that he was checking. Very slowly he lowered them, tightened them into fists like two stones. Down the street, old Jan de Wet stiffened in his creaking basket chair on the stoep of his shabby, crumbling house; plucked with shaking fingers at his thin beard.

"Marijke!" he called. "Marijke!" But there was no answer. Only the light sound of running feet as a girl flung herself into the shadows of the night, panting, her face wet with tears.

"He's come for me!" she whispered. "He's come back for me!"

And others ran. Karel Brandt, and Bikke Malan, and Dol Pereira, the wastrels, the ones who sang instead of working, and lay in the sun, and gambled, and poached game, and had even stolen a sheep one time when they wanted a feast. And Abraham ran, the little Bushman who followed the wastrel white men like a brown, wrinkled shadow. He ran half sideways, crablike, his hunting bow across his stooped, naked shoulders, a scoured tin clashing softly against his skinny thighs, a fur cap on his head like the lifted scalp of a hare. And he too was crying.

"My baas," he whispered. "Baas Andries is back."

Andries van Cilliers, who sang as clear and cool as crystal water, his fingers dreaming on the strings of his guitar; Andries with his strand of soft black hair that always fell across his white forehead when he was singing; Andries was back from gaol.

The poaching had begun it. And the stolen sheep had finished it. For sheep are property. "A boy of your name!" the magistrate had said. "Guilty of theft!"

And there were tears in his voice, because he was an old man and it hurt him to the soul to punish a white man for anything. But to steal a sheep is terrible. And not even for money! Simply to waste it on a feast for skellums! "Sergeant du Toit, what can you say for him?"

"Nothing," the sergeant had said. "He is a disgrace to his family and to this district. He needs a lesson. A lesson that will be an example to others, as well . . ." A lesson to Bikke Malan, and Karel Brandt, and Dol Pereira. And to Marijke de Wet, too, for the matter of that. They were all of a likeness. It was only accident that Andries had been caught and not the others. But a good accident, because he was the worst.

With him gone from the district the others might listen to reason, give up their idleness, grow into respectable people like

their parents. And so the magistrate gave Andries a lesson. Six months in Pretoria gaol. Andries pushed back the hair from his forehead and made a sad, self-mocking face.

"Will they let me keep my guitar in the tronk?" he said.

Nobody answered him, and the sergeant wheeled him away, out of the little stuffy, corrugated iron court-house, into the blinding sunlight. A few natives were there to stare at the strange spectacle of a white man in trouble. But no one else. Everyone who wasn't a witness in the case was too ashamed to look. No white man from the dorp had gone to gaol for theft in living memory.

"How long did they give you, my baas?" one of the natives called out.

"Six months," said Andries, and the natives clicked and wondered among themselves.

"Voetsak," the sergeant shouted, and they slouched reluctantly away, leaving Andries and the sergeant and Hendrik the storekeeper, whose sheep had made the feast, standing alone for a moment in the golden stillness on the steps of the little court-house. A scatter of tin-roofed houses in front of them, a few green trees, and beyond them and around them the wide, empty, sunburnt wilderness of the Transvaal.

"Come," the sergeant said impatiently. But Andries didn't move. It was as if he was waiting. And suddenly, from the far end of the dusty street, someone came running. Little and brown, in a flap and clatter of rubbish, fur cap askew, bow on back, old tin banging at his belt above his leather apron. He flung himself down by Andries' feet, and rocked and cried.

"My baas, my baas," he whimpered. "Who will be kind to me when you are gone?"

Andries smiled sadly at him. "All will come right, my Abraham," he said. "Miss Marijke will give you food; and six months is not for ever."

"Come," the sergeant said again, and gripped Andries by the arm. They went down the street towards the white police post, and the Bushman lay in the road and covered his head with dust.

Marijke de Wet waited for the dark to say good-bye. She went stealing to the back of the police post, dragged an empty petrol drum to the wall, and climbed up until she could put her face between the bars of the one high window of the one cell.

"Andries," she whispered.

He pulled himself up by his hands, gripping the bars. "Wait for me," he breathed. "Swear that you'll wait for me."

For answer she put her mouth against his cheek, found his mouth. "O, my sorrow," she whispered. "O, my loved one."

And they kissed in the darkness, tasting the iron of the bars in

their kisses, until he could hold his grip no longer. That was their good-bye. The next day two police came in a truck to start him on his journey to Pretoria. And two nights later Hendrik van Niekerk had his best shoes cleaned three times over before he was satisfied, and took a jar of melon confyt, and a tin of cookies, and a tin of tobacco, and went to call on the de Wets.

He walked heavily, because he was a heavy man. And slowly, because he had decided an important thing. He would ask for Marijke de Wet in marriage. Not tonight, of course. But what he was doing was the first, unmistakable, irreversible step. And he knew that it was mad. The de Wets were poor. Old Vrou de Wet was Portuguese, a Pereira, aunt to Dol Pereira the skellum. Bad blood. No money.

And yet he was doing it. And in his slow hard mind he was still wondering why. But in his heart he knew. Because of the lift of her head and the litheness of her step. Because of the suppleness of her narrow waist, and the fullness of her breasts under her cheap cotton dress. Because of the white fineness of her throat. Because of her voice that was like warm honey. It would caress a man like the breast of a bird against the lids of his eyes. She would warm his house. And with marriage to a decent man the wildness would go out of her . . .

Hendrik checked his step for a moment as that thought came to him. Would it go out of her? Then he opened his hand in front of him like a wooden paddle, and smiled. And if the weight of a husband's hand was not enough, then a length of rattan cane perhaps. The wildness would go out of her.

He went on, and up the steps of the de Wets' house. The confyt for Vrou de Wet, fat and smiling, her hair still black as the wing of a bird, her face still handsome, her mother's heart already sending out the smallest seedling of hope that the storekeeper might have marriage in his thoughts. The tobacco for old Jan de Wet, who took it gravely, complimenting Hendrik on the smoothness of its flavour. And lastly, as her mother drew her, reluctant, on to the stoep, the cookies for Marijke.

She took them sullenly, with only a mutter of thanks.

"Ja?" said her father. "Is that the way to thank Uncle Hendrik for his fine gift?" All grown white men are uncle to all white children. But Marijke was not a child, and Hendrik did not wish to be her uncle.

"Just call me Hendrik," he said, flushing very slightly. But she called him nothing. Only crouched on a riempie stool as far from him as her mother would allow her to get, and slipped away as soon as the chance came. But for this first time no one minded. Shyness is good in a wife.

"I am glad that skellum Andries is gone," Hendrik said. "He was a bad influence on many."

"Ja," said old Jan, smoking his tobacco.

Vrou de Wet brought peach brandy, and some of the confyt in a dish.

"It will be best if he does not come back," said Hendrik.

"Ja," answered Jan.

"But at least it will be six months. Or four and a half if he behaves himself and is given his quarter remission of sentence."

"Four and a half," said Jan thoughtfully. He looked sideways at the shadowy yard where Marijke had disappeared. "Ja. Four and a half months. Much can happen in four and a half months."

"Much," said Hendrik.

And Sunday after Sunday he came to the de Wets with small gifts, and heavy, certain mind, until Marijke lay like a netted bird between the pressures of her father and her mother and the storekeeper. She was sent to buy things from the store, and he served her with his own hands. Pressed a cookie on her while she waited. Brushed against her as he moved. Touched her hands as he put a small parcel into them. And without knowing it, ran the tip of his red, thick tongue along his wet lips when he looked at her. Allemagtig! What a woman she would make, what a vrou, when she was fattened up, quieted down.

After two months he spoke of it to old Jan openly. And old Jan nodded slowly over his tobacco, concealing his pleasure. A week later he spoke of it to Vrou de Wet, and she cried and kissed him, smelling of garlic, which he hated. But he put up with it. And a month after that, when her parents had had time to prepare her, he spoke of it to Marijke.

"You are almost a grown woman, Marijke," he began. She looked at him with hunted eyes. "You must already be thinking that one day you will take a husband?" She said nothing. Only shrank back into the darkness of the stoep.

He rested his heavy red hands on his thick knees, ran his tongue along his lips, peered at her. "Have you guessed why I come here each Sunday evening?"

"To torture me," she whispered, her body trembling.

He lifted his hands and laughed, a shade put out. Women were queer cattle, and never queerer than in marriage matters. "That is a strange word to say," he said. "Come here to me."

And as if he had hypnotised her, she came very slowly towards him, on her knees—as if she was already his slave. She felt a terrible heaviness on her heart, on her body—chained, helpless.

Who would protect her now? Dol? Bikke? Karel Brandt?

They had grown very quiet and afraid since Andries went to gaol. It had shocked them to their souls. Karel had even begun to work. Not that to work was terrible. But to work with a bent head. Not to sing. Not to laugh. Because in the dorp it was not respectable to laugh and sing. To make up verses. To stand and do nothing for a long time, looking at the sky. To lie under a tree because the tree was beautiful to see, beautiful to sleep under. These things revealed a light, a wicked mind.

Hendrik van Niekerk's wife would not dance and sing. But who would protect her from him? She came to him slowly, inch by inch, while his great hands waited for her on his fat thighs.

"Come here!" he whispered, and his heart beat to see her coming. Her hair dark as the darkness. Her face white. Her body full of mysteries, pliant and bending. His red tongue flickered like a lizard darting between pink stones. When she was near enough he took her wrists, pulled her to his knees.

"Now do you know why I come?" he whispered hoarsely. His breath hot on her face.

She flung back her head, tried to wrench her thin wrists from his hands. "Mamma!" she screamed, and in the house old Vrou de Wet smiled and nodded, caressing her bosom, tears of maternal joy running down her fat cheeks.

And Hendrik took his kiss. His first taste of the confyt that he was buying. "Allemagtig!" he whispered when he had drawn back his mouth from her frenzied, desperately-twisting face. "Allemagtig!"

He left then, unable to compose his heart in front of her, and she lay on the stoep sobbing until her mother came to her, lifted her up, drew her into the house with crooning words and caresses.

A month later again they set the wedding day. Not with any consent of Marijke's, but that was given for her by her smiling parents, who understood her shyness, overwhelmed by such a splendid man as Hendrik. And how could she speak to her father of Andries, who was white-faced in gaol five hundred miles away?

The marriage was to be soon. Almost as soon as Hendrik could order wedding things from Johannesburg.

Each day fell on her like the heavy link of a chain. She lay for long hours on her bed, not even crying, only staring at the dark. Remembering the horror of that first kiss of Hendrik's. The strength of his hands.

She was lying like that when she heard the singing. Stealing softly to her out of the night, like memory, like forgotten happiness. She seemed to lie for a long time listening to it before she realised. That it was Andries. Come back.

She left the bed in one smooth coil of litheness. Through the shadowy kitchen in her bare feet. Through the back yard, her hair flying like a dark cloud on the wind of her running. Between the little houses, the dusty gardens. Her heart pounding, her breath sobbing. "Andries! Andries!"

He heard her coming, played for her, the music thrumming, beating, lifting, faster, faster. Rose up to his feet as she flew towards him, his dark hair falling across his pale forehead, pale from the months between stone walls; ran his fingers in one last sweep across the strings and flung out his arms for her.

"Marijke!"

The others came softly. Karel. Bikke. Dol Pereira. Abraham, the little Bushman. They grinned awkwardly, seeing Marijke in Andries' arms. Clapped him on the shoulders, spat on the ground to hide their feelings. At least, the white men did. Abraham stayed back in the shadows, his tongue clicking as he crooned lost Bushman praises to himself. He was the only Bushman for far, far around, and he had no one to speak his language to. After a little while Andries called to him.

"Abraham, come!" The small brown man came, his lips splitting with his smile. "Did the meisje feed you, while I was away?"

For answer Abraham smiled wider still, patted his unwrinkled stomach with a wrinkled hand, did a little dance of joy.

Andries sank down on his heels, took his guitar again, thought above the strings. The others sat, waited. Abraham drew back again into the darker shadows of the trees.

"I will tell you of the tronk," said Andries, crooning softly. "I will tell you of the stones." His fingers touched the strings, woke the music, made such sadness in the night that Marijke cried and reached out her hands to be sure that he was there, that he was free, that the stones were gone.

"Small the sky above the prison," Andries sang. "Lost, the wind. The croaking of the frogs is stilled. Stilled in the darkness. By the stones." He smiled as he sang, bent his head, his dark hair falling. Marijke touched it with her hands, caressed his forehead.

"Eheh," cried Dol. "That is too sad a song for a welcome. Sing of gladness."

Andries smiled again, swept the strings faster, softer, quieter, looked at Marijke. "Beija-me," he whispered. "Beija-me muito."

"Ahi!" cried Marijke. Came to her feet. Curved up her arms, bent her dark head, clicked her fingers like small pistol shots, began to dance. Swept round the narrow circle of them with

lithe, swift steps, stilled, flung her head, danced again. Danced in joy for her lover under the moon, and the music lifted.

And the people of the dorp heard with their faces darkened, and thought of their sheep. Hendrik van Niekerk stepped out of his store, his face hard. Sergeant du Toit buttoned the top button of his tunic, closed the door of the police post behind him, began walking up the street with a heavy, angered tread.

Hendrik came to the thorn trees first. He stopped just out of their sight for a minute, staring, while the anger rose in him like flood water in the Orange River, thick and heavy. He saw her dancing. Saw her face in the light of the moon. Like ivory laughter. Joy itself. And the joy was a stab in his heart.

The music came to an end and she sank down on her knees in front of Andries, looking into his eyes. And Hendrik remembered the time she had been on her knees before him. She had not looked like this, that time. Her face alight. Her eyes like drowned stars.

" Beija-me," she was whispering. " Beija-me muito."

And Andries bent forward, kissed her on her lips. Ten yards away from them, Hendrik held his hands to his chest as if his heart was bursting out of it. Groaned in his throat. And flung himself forward into the circle, knocking Dol to one side and Bikke to another with his great knees, his hands groping blindly to grip hold of Marijke.

" Marijke! " he shouted. His hands found her dress, dragged her upright, away from Andries. " She's mine! " he bellowed. " *Mine!* "

And for a moment they were stunned into silence, motionless. By his huge voice. His bull body. His great red face; his wide-planted legs as thick as trees. Then Dol came to his feet, and there was a flicker of his hand to his hip and the white gleam of a knife.

" Take your hands from my cousin," he whispered.

Hendrik swung on him, dropped Marijke like a sack, and hit Dol full in the face, like the butt of a bull. Dol straightened as if he had been shot, blood starting from him, and Hendrik hit him in the body, under the heart, once, twice. Dol folded over, the knife falling from his hand, his eyes turning upwards as if he was dead. He fell on the sand and was quite still.

" Who else? " said Hendrik.

" Me," said Andries. He had no chance against Hendrik. No chance at all. But he stood up and put his guitar to one side out of harm's way.

" This I shall enjoy," said Hendrik. Crouching. Fists belt high. While Andries waited, thin as a springbok against a

buffalo. And suddenly stiffened, stepped back, wiped his hand across his pale face.

"What's this?" came Sergeant du Toit's voice. "Hendrik! Are they attacking you?" His boots crunched the sand as he ran up. He looked down at Dol and smiled. Saw the knife and picked it up, the smile fading. "Did they try to use this, Hendrik?"

"Ja, Cornelis," said Hendrik. "That skellum there—" he prodded Dol with his foot and Dol groaned and lay on his back. Marijke had crept to him, and now she smoothed his face with her hands, staring up at Hendrik, at Cornelis du Toit, the sergeant, her eyes dark with hatred.

"What has been happening?" said the sergeant.

"Just a singsong," said Andries. "A homecoming party." He looked down at Dol, at Marijke. "But it seems to be over."

"Better if you had not come home," said the sergeant. "We have no room for wastrels here."

"I shall not stay," said Andries. "I came back only for one thing." He looked at Marijke.

From beside him, Karel Brandt had faded backwards into the darkness. Bikke Malan stepped sideways from the sergeant, shuffled his feet, suddenly turned and ran. A long way off there was the soft clashing of the Bushman's water-tin, beating against his thigh as he loped away.

Andries spread his hands, smiled. "I will be gone tomorrow."

"Alone," said Hendrik harshly. He had gripped Marijke again, drawn her up from her cousin Dol, and now she stood like a prisoner between Hendrik and the sergeant. Andries bent his head.

"I will speak to this skellum in the morning about his knife," said the sergeant. He kicked Dol not very gently in the stomach, and turned away.

"Come," said Hendrik to Marijke. "Your father will have a word to say about all this. You should be whipped."

She went with him by force, her arm gripped above the elbow, but looking back over her shoulder at Andries. She called out to him in Portuguese, as if she was appealing to him to be saved. But he only stood, half lost already among the shadows of the trees. She called out again, and Hendrik shook her roughly.

"Stop that baboon's chatter," he said. They stopped short of the de Wets' house, and the sergeant went on.

"Now," said Hendrik. He swung her round to face him; gripped both her arms. Her face was paper white, her eyes like dead coals. And yet so beautiful that all that he had been going to say died in Hendrik's throat, and there was only passion there, like the hunger of a starving man.

He crushed her body against his, found her mouth with his mouth, forced her lips apart. Like wild honey mixed with wine . . .

And then such pain as he had never known in all his life. Stinging, searing, burning his mouth alive. She had bitten through his lower lip until her teeth met.

" Aaaaah," he screamed, and she was gone out of his hands in a flash, running for her life for the steps of her father's house. Behind her, Hendrik sank down on his knees in the road. He put his hands to his face, shook his great head, and bellowed with the agony. People came running, old Jan, neighbours, Sergeant du Toit, to stand round him in an astonished circle.

" Go away," Hendrik groaned at their amazed faces. " Leave me alone." He held his hands to his bloody, swelling lip, trying to hide it. Turned, stumbled through the staring circle of men, ran towards the store, clumped up its steps, into its darkness.

" The devil," he groaned through his teeth. " The she-devil! " He snatched down the sjambok that hung behind the door, brought its rhinoceros thong across the counter with a noise like a rifle shot. If it could be her back!

He went into the kitchen, found a mirror, iodine, a linen towel, warm water in a kettle. He dabbed softly at the red wound of his mouth, unstoppered the iodine, clenched his teeth. He couldn't. Couldn't put that burning pain to his own flesh with his own hand. Yet would the wound poison? He washed the blood away, sweat breaking on his forehead as he touched cut flesh. He put the iodine back unused, made a pad of cottonwool, fastened it with tape to his lip. Then took a bottle of brandy and drank from it, careful that no drop should go near his lip.

When he had had enough he sat down to still the trembling of his legs. The devil! The she-devil! As soon marry a spitting, clawing leopard out of the rocks. Yet without marrying there could be no revenge . . .

He went back into the front of the store, picked up the sjambok, flung it down again, went out of the house, and ran to the de Wets'. He didn't know what he was going to do, what he wanted to do. Except that it should be something that would break the devil in her for fifty years. He found old Jan on the stoep, smoking, three neighbours talking to him about Hendrik's strange behaviour.

" Where is she? " Hendrik said harshly. But they couldn't understand his words because of the pad of cottonwool on his lip, and he shook his fists at them until they were sure that he had gone mad. " Whah shah? " was all they could hear and they stared at him in fright; huge, brick-faced, sweating with anger, blood welling from under the bloody cottonwool.

He turned, kicked open the frame door, plunged into the house. Old Vrou de Wet screamed at the sight of him as he crashed past her. There were only three doors to open. The big bedroom, with its wide brass bedstead. The kitchen. And the narrow darkness where Marijke must sleep.

He burst into it, smashing its air of secret gentleness, of girlhood. He brought down his great hand on to the bed, preparing to grip cloth and flesh, to drag her on to the stoep, to . . . His hand closed on nothingness. She was not there.

In the doorway behind him, voices chattered. He swung on them, wanting to seize old Jan de Wet by the beard, shake him like a dassie until his neck broke. Behind the men, Vrou de Wet lifted a paraffin lamp with trembling hand, shining its light on the madman.

And as the light dispelled the shadows, Hendrik saw. That Marijke was gone for ever. From the way her few things were tumbled on the centre of the floor. An old dress. A shoe. A childhood book. Thrown down as she seized a small bundle of treasures. The pillowcase gone from the pillow, to hold them in. The bedclothes dragged aside.

He stood, unconscious of their voices, their questions, thinking. She had gone to Andries. But where? How could they travel from this place that was a hundred miles from anywhere? And as he wondered, he knew. The Pereiras' truck. They would borrow that. Dol would lend it to them.

But they would have to reach it first. Three miles up the north road. Was that what they were planning when she shouted to Andries in Portuguese?

He moved forward, seeing nothing but the north road, Marijke running, Andries with his arms held out to her, waiting. In front of him old Jan, Vrou de Wet, the neighbours, scattered to one side and another. He went through the house, into the street, began to run.

Three miles. How long was she gone? Ten minutes? Carrying a bundle. Not thinking to be followed.

He ran till the sweat oozed on his skin, flowed like oil, soaked his shirt. Each heavy shock of his boot on the road sending a fire of pain into his bloody mouth. A stitch like a knife in his ribs. His second wind. Running, running. And when he caught her, when she was under his hand— He closed his fists in front of his chest, twisted them, grinned, and gasped as the wound in his lip split open. To have her under his hand!

And then he saw them.

Three shadows on the road ahead, running, walking, running. Andries. Marijke. And a little behind them and to one side, the

Bushman, Abraham, loping, carrying a bundle as well as his own worn clatter of rubbish, his bow, his water-tin. The clashing of the tin came softly back on the wind.

Far ahead of them again there was a small square of yellow light in the darkness. A lamp in the Pereiras' window. And beside it would be the truck: the old, battered Chev held together by string and curses. But very far ahead. And Hendrik was gaining on them with each stride.

Abraham heard them first. Called out to Andries, "My baas, my baas, someone coming fast."-

Andries looked back, caught at Marijke's sleeve, ran faster, until she stumbled and almost fell. Twenty yards behind them. Ten.

"Run on," shouted Andries, threw his guitar aside, slowed, while Marijke shot ahead. Five yards. Three.

Hendrik gathered himself to jump, reached out his hands for Andries' shirt. And Andries dropped like a stone across his path, tripping him, sending him sprawling face down on the road.

Andries rolled with the force of the impact, lost his breath, scrambled, flung himself on Hendrik, trying to slide his arms under his shoulders, behind his neck. But he was too late. Hendrik was already on his knees, shaking the pain out of his eyes, like a buffalo against a leopard.

He tensed himself against Andries, stood up with Andries clinging to him, tried to hit him. But they were clasped too close. They swayed in the road, Andries locked to the bigger man, gripping him for life. He flung back his head.

"Run," he shouted. "Run for the farm." And gave Hendrik his chance. A hand under Andries' chin, forcing it back until the bones of his neck cracked. The big, splayed fingers groping for Andries' eyes. Andries let go, hit Hendrik in the stomach, and then in the mouth, on his wound.

And with that, Hendrik went mad. He leapt on Andries, smashed him to the ground, knelt on him, crashed his fists into Andries' face. Andries twisted, screamed, clawed at Hendrik's shirt.

"Skellum. Swine," Hendrik shouted. Or tried to shout. But only a bellow of rage came. A scarlet curtain of blood over his eyes. He lifted his fist like a hammer, kneeling on Andries' stomach, crushing him, killing him, picking the place where he would smash him first. To kill him by inches. Andries the skellum, the singer, the wastrel, the stealer of Marijke. To kill, to kill.

He shook off the light thing that seemed to resist his hand. Light. Nothing. And yet it made him look up for a second. To

see Abraham. The little Bushman. Holding something. Drawing one hand back from the other. Drawing his small, ridiculous Bushman bow.

"Baas Hendrik," Abraham whispered, almost apologising, shocked himself at what he was doing. "Baas Hendrik, stop."

"Voetsak," Hendrik snarled. "Are you mad?" It came only as sounds, but Abraham understood. He pushed forward the arrow on his bow until its blackened tip was inches from Hendrik's eyes.

"This arrow is very poisoned, my baas. Bad, bad poison."

Hendrik knelt very still, his hand still lifted to strike, but frozen. Quite suddenly he felt that he was cold. Cold sweat on his back. On his face. A coldness in his loins. He looked at the arrow, at the tar-black smear on its stone tip that made a darker shadow in the moonlight.

Under him, Andries struggled, heaved, and the heaving threw Hendrik forward almost against the arrow point. He flinched, and shuddered, remembering a big impala he had seen once up in the Kalahari, poisoned by a Bushman arrow. It had taken a long time to die. He shrank back, taking the weight of his knees from Andries.

"You wouldn't dare!" he whispered. The arrow followed him, still inches from his staring eyes. It would be very easy to reach out, to grip the Bushman by his skinny neck, strangle him. But easier still for the Bushman to loose the string of the bow, loose the arrow.

Andries came to his feet, dragging air into his lungs, pushing back the dark hair from his forehead, bending forward to ease the pain where Hendrik had crushed his ribs.

"Run for the farm, my baas," the Bushman called to him. "I will keep Baas Hendrik here till you come."

But already the truck was coughing, rattling towards them, driven by Dol, fetched by Marijke. It came in a stench of burnt oil, grinding metal, halted.

Andries went aside into the darkness, found his guitar where he had thrown it down, clambered into the truck beside Marijke and Dol. "Come, Abraham. Up," he shouted, and the small brown man backed away from Hendrik until he was beside the truck, the arrow still on the string. Then, swift as a monkey, he swung up into the body of the truck as the engine stammered, roared, the truck moved. It gained pace, swung in a wide circle into the veld, back on to the road. They could see Hendrik standing, his fists lifted. Hear his broken, shouting curses.

"Ag," said Dol. "Abraham should have shot him. Where shall we go?"

"North," said Andries. He slid his guitar across his knees, touched the strings to see if they were hurt.

"North is big," said Dol.

"That's why," said Andries. The strings hummed and sang among the crashing noises of the ancient truck, whispered of love. Marijke laid her face against Andries' shoulder, slid her thin hand under his arm, held him close.

The lights of the truck lit up the long road ahead. A running buck jumped through the lights, from darkness into darkness. Behind them the dorp hummed like a nest of bees, gradually quieted, sank into sleep. Woke. Healed its respectability. Worked. Slept. Forgot. The singers, the wastrels, had been cast out into darkness as should be done.

It was a long time before any in the dorp heard what had become of them. Five years. And then they didn't understand.

"Paris?" said old Jan, reading the letter with wondering eyes through his steel spectacles. "A night club? Allemagtig, what is a night club?"

But old Vrou de Wet could not tell him. Only cry over her daughter's writing on the page, touch the enormous money order with bewildered fingers.

We dance, the letter said. *And sing and play. Dances out of Africa. And I think that they love Abraham the best of all. We have been so very poor, and often hungry, it is strange to have become rich.*

"The Mother of Heaven has cared for her," old Vrou de Wet whispered.

"In Paris there is only sin," said her husband. "We must tell no one of this thing."

And if they had told, who in the dorp would have understood? Understood how, in that expensive cellar eight thousand miles away—the sounds of glass and silver hushed, voices stilled, as the lights softly lit the tiny stage—a man with dark hair falling across his pale forehead, touching the strings of his guitar so lightly that the music never woke from sleeping, dreamt of Africa, filled the shadows of the room with dreams; a girl dancing, while her cousin played strange music on the piano for her, haunting, lonely as the veld at night; and perhaps most wonderful of all, a small brown man with a bow, and a water-tin, and a cap made of fur, who danced small dances out of the beginning of time, and thought that he had come to Paradise.

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★ ★ ★

Shotgun wedding: A wife or death affair.

The best of Saroyan—a vintage story reprinted by readers' special request

SNAKE

BY WILLIAM SAROYAN

WALKING through the park in May, he saw a small brown snake slipping away from him through grass and leaves, and he went after it with a long twig, feeling as he did so the instinctive fear of man for reptiles.

Ah, he thought, our symbol of evil, and he touched the snake with the twig, making it squirm. The snake lifted its head and struck at the twig, then shot away through the grass, hurrying fearfully, and he went after it.

It was very beautiful and it was amazingly clever, but he intended to stay with it for a while and find out something about it.

The little brown snake led him deep into the park, so that he was hidden from view and alone with it. He had a guilty feeling that in pursuing the snake he was violating some rule of the park, and he prepared a remark for anyone who might discover him. I am a student of contemporary morality, he thought he would say, or, I am a sculptor and I am studying the structure of reptiles. At any rate, he would make some sort of reasonable explanation.

He would not say that he intended to kill the snake.

He moved beside the frightened reptile, leaping now and then to keep up with it, until the snake became exhausted and could not go on. Then he squatted on his heels to have a closer view of it, holding the snake before him by touching it with the twig. He admitted to himself that he was afraid to touch it with his hands. To touch a snake was to touch something secret in the mind of man, something one ought never to bring out into the light. That sleek gliding, and that awful silence, *was* once man, and now that man had come to this last form, here were snakes still moving over the earth as if no change had ever taken place.

The first male and female, biblical; and evolution. Adam and Eve, and the human embryo.

It was a lovely snake, clean and graceful and precise. The

snake's fear frightened him and he became panic stricken thinking that perhaps all the snakes in the park would come quietly to the rescue of the little brown snake and surround him with their malicious silence and the unbearable horror of their evil forms. It was a large park and there must be thousands of snakes in it. If all the snakes were to find out that he was with this little snake, they would easily be able to paralyse him.

He stood up and looked around. All was quiet. The silence was almost the biblical silence of *in the beginning*. He could hear a bird hopping from twig to twig in a low earthbush near by, but he was alone with the snake. He forgot that he was in a public park in a large city. An aeroplane passed overhead but he did not see or hear it. The silence was too emphatic and his vision was too emphatically focused on the snake before him.

In the garden with the snake, unnaked in the beginning, in the year 1931.

He squatted on his heels again and began to commune with the snake. It made him laugh, inwardly and outwardly, to have the form of the snake so substantially before him, apart from his own being, flat on the surface of the earth instead of subtly a part of his own identity. It was really a tremendous thing. At first he was afraid to speak aloud, but as time went on he became less timid, and began to speak in English to it. It was very pleasant to speak to the snake.

" All right," he said, " here I am, after all these years, a young man living on the same earth, under the same sun, having the same passions. And here you are before me, the same. The situation is the same. What do you intend to do? Escape? I will not let you escape. What have you in mind? How will you defend yourself? I intend to destroy you. As an obligation to man."

The snake twitched before him helplessly, unable to avoid the twig. It struck at the twig several times and then became too tired to bother with it. He drew away the twig and heard the snake say, " Thank you."

He began to whistle to the snake to see if the music would have any effect on its movements, if it would make the snake dance. *You are my only love*, he whistled; Schubert made into a New York musical comedy; *my only love, my only love;* but the snake would not dance. Something Italian perhaps, he thought, and began to sing *la donna è mobile*, intentionally mispronouncing the words in order to amuse himself. He tried a Brahms lullaby, but the music had no effect on the snake. It was tired. It was frightened. It wanted to get away.

He was amazed at himself suddenly; it had occurred to him to

let the snake flee, to let it glide away and be lost in the lowly worlds of its kind. Why should he allow it to escape?

He lifted a heavy boulder from the ground and thought, Now I shall bash your head with this rock and see you die.

To destroy that evil grace, to mangle that sinful loveliness.

But it was very strange. He could not let the rock fall on the snake's head, and began suddenly to feel sorry for it. "I am sorry," he said, dropping the boulder. "I beg your pardon. I see now that I have only love for you."

And he wanted to touch the snake with his hands, to hold it and understand the truth of its touch. But it was difficult. The snake was frightened and each time he extended his hands to touch it, the snake turned on him and charged. "I have only love for you," he said. "Do not be afraid. I am not going to hurt you." Then, swiftly, he lifted the snake from the earth, learnt the true feel of it, and dropped it. "There," he said. "Now I know the truth. A snake is cold, but it is clean. It is not slimy, as I thought."

He smiled upon the little brown snake. "You may go now," he said. "The inquisition is over. You are yet alive. You have been in the presence of man, and you are yet alive. You may go now."

But the snake would not go away. It was exhausted with fear. He felt deeply ashamed of what he had done, and angry with himself. Jesus, he thought, I have scared the little snake. It will never get over this. It will always remember me squatting over it. "For God's sake," he said to the snake, "go away. Return to your kind. Tell them what you saw, you yourself, with your own eyes. Tell them what you felt. The sickly heat of the hand of man. Tell them of the presence you felt."

Suddenly the snake turned from him and spilt itself forward, away from him. "Thank you," he said. And it made him laugh with joy to see the little snake throwing itself into the grass and leaves, thrusting itself away from man. "Splendid," he said; "hurry to them and say that you were in the presence of man and that you were not killed. Think of all the snakes that live and die without ever meeting man. Think of the distinction it will mean for you."

It seemed to him that the little snake's movements away from him were the essence of joyous laughter, and he felt greatly pleased. He found his way back to the path, and continued his walk.

In the evening, while she sat at the piano, playing softly, he said, "A funny thing happened."

She went on playing. "A funny thing?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I was walking through the park and I saw a little brown snake."

She stopped playing and turned on the bench to look at him. "A snake?" she said. "How ugly!"

"No," he said. "It was beautiful."

"What about it?"

"Oh, nothing," he said. "I just caught it and wouldn't let it go for a while."

"But why?"

"For no good reason at all," he said.

She walked across the room and sat beside him, looking at him strangely.

"Tell me about the snake," she said.

"It was lovely," he said. "Not ugly at all. When I touched it, I felt its cleanliness."

"I am so glad," she said. "What else?"

"I wanted to kill the snake," he said. "But I couldn't. It was too lovely."

"I'm so glad," she said. "But tell me everything."

"That's all," he said.

"But it isn't," she said. "I know it isn't. Tell me everything."

"It is very funny," he said. "I was going to kill the snake, and not come here again."

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she said.

"Of course I am," he said.

"What else?" she said. "What did you think of me when you had the snake before you?"

"You will be angry," he said.

"Oh, nonsense. It is impossible for me to be angry with you. Tell me."

"Well," he said, "I thought you were lovely but evil."

"Evil?"

"I told you you would be angry."

"And then?"

"Then I touched the snake," he said. "It wasn't easy, but I picked it up with my hands. What do you make of this? You've read a lot of books about such things. What does it mean, my picking up the snake?"

She began to laugh softly, intelligently. "Why," she laughed, "it means, it simply means that you are an idiot. Why, it's splendid."

"Is that according to Freud?" he said.

"Yes," she laughed. "According to Freud."

"Well, anyway," he said, "it was very fine to let the snake go free."

"Have you ever told me you loved me?" she asked.

"You ought to know," he said. "I do not remember one or two things I have said to you."

"No," she said. "You have never told me."

She began to laugh again, feeling suddenly very happy about him. "You have always talked of other things," she said. "Irrelevant things. At the most amazing times." She laughed.

"This snake," he said, "was a little brown snake."

"And that explains it," she said. "You have never intruded."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he said.

"I'm so glad you didn't kill the snake," she said.

She returned to the piano, and placed her hands softly upon the keys.

"I whistled a few songs to the snake," he said. "I whistled a fragment from Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. I would like to hear that. You know, the melody that was used in a musical comedy called *Blossom Time*. The part that goes, *you are my only love, my only love*, and so on."

She began to play softly, feeling his eyes on her hair, on her hands, her neck, her back, her arms, feeling him studying her as he had studied the snake.

SAINTS WOT THEY USED T'BE

Even if you haven't a halo yourself it's easy to spot a gilt saucer on someone else's head, and everyone has a favourite saint in the calendar, so try your memory on our reverend list. **Solutions on page 92**

1. *What saint anticipated Joy Adamson (author of Born Free) in his dealings with what animal?*
2. *Which saint was the subject of a barbecue? (And gave his name to a seaway.)*
3. *Who is the patron saint of Scotland?*
4. *Can you locate: St. Ives, Ste. Gudule, Santa Sophia?*
5. *St. Elmo's fire is—what?*
6. *St. Cyr and St. Martin's-le-Grand have more mundane connections—do you know what they are?*
7. *Can you name a king of England who was canonised?*
8. *Which well-known saint was canonised in* 1920? *And was the subject of a famous play in* 1924?
9. *What is hagiology?*

THE QUEST

The man on the floor asked in a husky, thickened voice, " Who are you? "

BY MICHAEL BARRETT

CURRALL stood in the hot sunlight upon the pavement, outside the shabby façade of the police station: and he was shivering with the same nervous hesitancy before the unknown which had plagued him through all this long journey towards discovery. Fear had travelled with him, from London airport as the aircraft lifted over the tarmac, to Bogota, to Cucuta, now here among the hills where the Colombian forests grew dark and deep over the mountainsides, looming over the town. Fear of the unknown and the new experience, the disturbing encounter; because he was still a timorous, unadventurous Man of God. And over all, fear of the truth at the end of the journey . . .

At last he walked inside, into the dilapidated gloom of the interior of the station, where a scruffy policeman sprawled at a desk among peeling, festering walls and dank air. The brown-skinned guard stared up, observing Currall's dog-collar and dark grey suit with a wary, unsure attention; his gaze flickered over the pale and creased face, faded and mild blue eyes.

" Well? "

Currall said, " I have an appointment with the Chief of Police." He spoke Spanish badly, struggling for words.

The policeman dragged himself to his feet. " Your name? "

" My name is Currall." Currall stood stiffly in front of the desk, conscious of the sweat upon him; and yet he was still shivering.

" Wait here." The guard came back after a while, nodding his head. " The Chief's ready to see you."

Currall walked along the passage. The police chief got up from his chair to greet him. " Good day, Father."

Currall said with the same uncertainty, his tongue stumbling, " I am—not a Catholic. Of the Protestant church—one of the opposition." He put on a weak smile.

" So." The police chief waved a paw, dismissing it. He pointed to a chair. " Be seated." He addressed Currall importantly. " Me—I am Franz Butrone. Chief of Police, District of

Lajas. At your service." They sat in the office and stared at one another. The room was ill-kept like the rest of the station, the plaster cracking, the windows unwashed. A map covered one wall; a half-empty bottle of whisky stood among a pile of papers on the desk. The Chief of Police was a fleshy, heavily-built man with cropped grey hair and a hard, narrow-eyed face. He had pursed and sensual lips which had a wry twist that was half cruel and half humorous. His expression was fierce and yet ironical. He wore a white shirt and twill trousers belted by a leather strap with a huge, Inca-design bronze buckle. At last he said, "Now what can I do for you—hah—Mister Currall?"

Currall paused. Then he said slowly, "As you know, I've come to find out about the death of my brother."

Butrone shrugged. "Very sad . . . But it was a month ago now. What's done is done . . . You shouldn't have come all this way. From London? No, it's best to stay remote, Mister Currall. Then one does not feel so much the hurt."

Currall shifted obstinately in his seat. "There are things I want to know." He threaded the words into an awkward sentence. Then his tone changed. "You speak English—we could talk in English?"

The police chief shook a ponderous head. "I'm sorry. Spanish it must be."

Currall ran a finger around his stiff white collar. He was oppressed by a sense of impending failure and despair, conscious of his own inadequacy in the world of action as ever he had been conscious; more strongly still since he had left the quiet, easy security of church and parish in rural Leicestershire to face the difficulties and oppressions of this world of passports and visas, of foreign tongues and foreign habits, of rudenesses and barbarities and dangers, and travail enduring on this long, desperate quest to find what he sought about Robin . . . He repeated with the same anxious obstinacy, "I've come to find out."

The shaggy eyebrows of Butrone lifted. "What?"

Currall said carefully, "Please tell me again what happened. Simply, please—or I shan't understand."

Now the expressive mouth of the police chief moved in a grimace that combined mockery with scorn. And only a flickering of sympathy. "Very well, Mister Currall. All I have discovered.

"Your brother was one of a party of nine travellers in a bus heading to meet the Great Andean Highway—up in the mountains, north of here. Unfortunately there was an ambush by the bandit Anduze. He killed the coach-driver and took the passengers as hostages, for ransom. It is a favourite trick of his . . . No money was paid, and so Anduze shot one of the passengers as

an example. He released the others. The captive he shot was your brother."

They were silent. Currall said, "Why wasn't the ransom money paid?"

"The messenger of Anduze went astray—he never reached the town. No one knew anything of the matter until the survivors were discovered . . ." The police chief declared vigorously, "He's a devil, that Marc Anduze. One day we shall have him, and then he'll scream—"

Currall interrupted with abrupt temerity. "All this I know. Two things I don't know—for them I've come to find."

"Yes?" Butrone's voice was threaded with rudeness; smoky eyes probed derisively the stooped, fragile body of the middle-aged Englishman.

Currall said slowly, "I want to know why the bandit chose my brother from the others. And then I want to know how my brother died, how he faced death."

The police chief stared at him with a lifting of surprise. "This is all over. Why trouble yourself?"

Currall repeated, "I want to know why."

"So do you now?" Something like anger sparked Butrone. "You waste both our times, Mister Currall, you'll get no answers . . . Why he was chosen, who knows? Anduze stretched out a hand—your brother was nearest. So chance is life and death . . . We know of none who saw him die.

"Go home, Mister Currall, and forget." He waved a big hand dismissively. "I have so much else to do."

Currall felt despair like grey dust in his heart; and still he was conscious of his own inadequacy, his inability to bluster and fight. "No," he said. "No, I shan't go yet. The other passengers? Where can I find them?"

Butrone waved his hand again, contemptuously wide. "All gone, all departed . . . I tell you, this was a month ago, they have left on their ways. There's nothing you can do, nothing."

"Who were they?"

Butrone frowned. "A couple of travelling salesmen, a school-teacher. A farmer . . . Yes, a pregnant woman going to a clinic, some carpenter. Two Indians from the hills. An unimportant collection—Anduze was only asking three thousand pesos for their ransom." His tone implied their lives were barely worth that sum in any event.

Currall said with sudden boldness, "Who are you to judge?" Then his gaze fell away. Once more he muttered, "I want to know why."

The police chief swung a puzzled head. "I don't understand

you. No, I don't understand. Why? Then why anything?"

Currall looked up at him at last. He said with nervous, unsteady dignity, "I have always believed in the purpose of God. That He ordains the world to His will, that there is meaning in all He does. Now I want to know why He chose my brother among all these for death. And whether my brother met death with Him—or alone."

Butrone pushed back his chair and lumbered to his feet. "With respect to your position—" but he showed no respect—"I think you're a fool. To whatever church you belong—I think you know little of God—and little of life."

A flush started on Currall's cheek; he felt it burn. Words broke out. "I resent that. I believe in God's purpose. What are you, an atheist—?"

Butrone slammed a hand on his desk, rocking the whisky bottle. His dark face glittered. "I am a good Catholic. I go to the church, I pray before Holy Jesus and the Virgin, and beneath the flames They are near to me . . . But you fool, you Englishman, I don't see a simple, child's storybook world like that. God's no easy god, there's no understanding Him, He doesn't deal out punishment and reward like a schoolmaster, He doesn't hold trial like a judge. Not in this world, friend, maybe over Heaven and Hell . . . But here, there's no reckoning, there's no accounting. You'll see no balance in His design. Forget your comfortable illusion of good and bad and justice— Death is bloodthirsty and greedy around these hills, and he waits for no signed warrant from the Lord—"

"That's paganism. You're no Christian—"

Butrone snapped, "Hah, you're a child. A simple-minded suckling for all your grey hairs . . . You must live in a dreamland, sheltered from the truth. Life is cruel and futile, Mister Currall —open your eyes."

Then suddenly the erratic, unstable violence died from him and he sat down once more, lowering his broad frame into the sagging chair.

Currall's breath was coming in jerks: affrightedly he watched the police chief, and their stares met once more.

At last Currall said, "Chief of Police—I still want to find out why."

Butrone poured himself a stiff tot of whisky without offering any to Currall. He swallowed it and licked his lips. Then he said grudgingly, "Anduze's gang has split up since last month, nobody knows why . . . One of the bandits has been captured and is in the gaol—tomorrow he dies. You can talk to him. If you want—"

"Please may I?" Currall was sharply afraid, despite his efforts at control.

"Come this way." Butrone strode out of the room, down the corridor and across an enclosed yard where the crumbling ochre walls fenced the sky. He walked with a shambling, hurried gait; Currall padded along quickly behind him.

The cell was stinking and filthy; a small, sly-faced man with an Indian slant to his features sat huddled on the bench, a ragged grey blanket round him. He lifted his head to the door-grating and he was sallow and impassive. Long black hair clung tight to his scalp. Butrone went inside and Currall followed, flinching at the smell, retching.

The Chief of Police lashed out a boot. "Get up! Answer these questions." Then he turned harshly on Currall. "So go ahead."

Currall swallowed. Then he said, "I want to know about the man—the man your chief shot. The Englishman, last month." Again he stumbled over the Spanish.

Butrone snapped tersely. "At Choel. The coach party. Answer, you pig's abortion." He kicked out again.

The bandit stood sullenly still, his grey eyes empty and indifferent. He winced as the police chief's heavy boot scraped his shin. A gleam started in the sombre eyes, then died into nothing.

Currall said uncertainly, not looking at him, "I want to know why—your chief—picked the Englishman for execution. The man called Robin Currall . . . Why was he chosen?"

The bandit's expression did not change. Butrone rapped out the question again in fluid Spanish. Still the small dark man made no response. He stood stiff, swaying slightly in the shadows of the cell, the thin grey eyes watery and blinking like a rat's.

The police chief's steel-tipped boot lifted once more. "Answer—"

Then the bandit spoke. His beady eyes rose to Currall's, and again Currall's stare fled away. The man said unemotionally, flat-voiced, "He was not chosen. He chose himself—he told the chief he wanted to die."

Butrone's face split into astonishment. Currall took a step backwards, caught by a sweeping wave of hope and then terror. The police chief's gaze searched him.

At last Currall said with a trembling voice, "How did he die? How was he, at the end?"

Butrone swung on the prisoner again. "The truth! Let's have the truth or you suffer—"

The bandit stood silent; his antagonistic eyes slid from side to

side, piercing Currall, travelling over his clerical attire and stricken face, moving back to the heavy body of the police chief. Dark stillness gathered over him; then he began to laugh, with black, malicious humour gurgling like bile. The words choked out. "He died in fear. Yes, he was belly-sick and hopeless. He died cursing life and cursing death, he died damned and spitting as I shall die tomorrow." And he gobbed at Currall, still chuckling with black hate.

Butrone threshed out a fist and sent him crashing against the wall. The police chief jerked his head; Currall wiped his own face and preceded Butrone outside the cell.

They walked back to the office, their footsteps echoing down the corridors . . . Currall went shakily, with terrible fright inside him, mixed with nausea.

They stood in the police chief's room. Butrone said, "Well, Mister Currall? Have you found what you came for?" His tone was cruel; remnants of pity lurked somewhere beneath his set face.

Currall muttered restively, "I don't know . . . I don't know."

Butrone fingered his belt. "Your brother must have been ill of the world indeed, to seek death like that. Why?"

Currall shook his head dazedly. "I don't want to talk . . ."

"You see, Mister Currall?" Butrone stared at the cracked dog-collar once more. "The world is more savage than you think. Men sometimes choose death not for God, but for darkness and oblivion, for escape. But you and I know, these men deliver themselves into the infernal fires for eternity . . ."

"I don't want to hear—"

"To die in self-sacrifice is great, but in negation it's suicide. A mortal, fearful sin."

Currall said desperately, "I want to find Anduze. He's the only one who knows the story. I want to find him—"

"And he is in the hills. My men are hunting him—but I know we'll never find him."

Currall turned for the door. Suddenly he swung back on the police chief. Unexpected anger fired him to response. "You're a frightened man yourself. There's something sick in your own soul—that's why you're so bitter. You're crawling and in fear of God's judgment over yourself."

Trembling, he stood still. Butrone staggered back as the outburst of words struck him; he quailed as beneath the impact of bullets, grabbing for the desk. Then he reached out for the whisky bottle.

Currall dragged himself away, and went back to the sleazy hotel. He lay on the bed all afternoon, staring at the ceiling,

still trembling and pale with the thought of Robin's dying.

Beyond the window in heat haze shimmered the forests on the hills. He prayed to God for his brother's soul; and, too, he prayed for his own strength and salvation. But no peace came, and no power.

Much later, there was a knock at the door. He opened, and the hotel-keeper stood before him. " A phone call—from the Chief of Police, downstairs."

Currall followed the patron down to the alcove in the hall and the telephone. Anxiously he picked up the handset. " Yes? "

" Ah—it's Mister Currall? " Butrone spoke as anxiously as Currall had done.

" Yes."

" I have some news for you. A coincidence. Most unbelievable . . . I have just had word that the bandit Marc Anduze has been located. He has gone to earth alone—he's trapped." The voice came rapidly over the wire.

Currall said stupidly, " Where? "

" Ah . . . That's so strange. He is hiding all by himself in a hut on the hills. Near a place called Choel. It is—the same place where they took and killed your brother."

Currall was rigid.

At last Butrone went on, " In the morning I am going up after him. It's nearly a day's journey distant." He paused again. Then he asked unsurely, " You want to come? "

Currall shivered.

Butrone said, " Eh? Eh? "

Finally Currall found a voice. " Yes. I'll come."

" We start at dawn. By the quickest route. There's no road, so we'll take mules." Butrone slammed down the phone with nervous urgency.

Currall returned to the bedroom. Once more he prayed, and then in queasy fright he waited.

The mules rode bumpily over the uneven track. Currall swayed and pitched, clinging on wildly. The town lay way below, and around them rose the steep crags of rock, clumps of trees, expanses of bare scrub-covered ground and screes. The day was fresh and clear. Butrone rode side by side with Currall, his gross body overflowing on either flank of the stunted mule. A small column of police went before and behind, travelling the slow climb to Choel.

Butrone pointed across the hill to an unmade road which snaked the slopes towards the valley. " That is the road on which the bus was travelling. We go—there." He gestured over the crest.

Currall did not reply. They journeyed on, still climbing.

Butrone glanced at him from time to time, his swarthy, sardonic face congested now with some worry and uncertainty. Finally he said, "Tell me, Mister Currall . . . I am very interested."

"Yes?"

"Your brother and yourself . . . I'm not quite clear. Your relationship—there's something I don't know. The man he was . . . Please tell me."

Currall shook his head.

"Please tell me." And there was some genuine entreaty within him.

Currall was suddenly moved to confidence, here in the fresh windy air. He rode his mule over the mountains, as a man among men for all his cowardices and nervousnesses, for all the cloth which set him apart, the cloth which had been his refuge. He said slowly, "Very well—"

Butrone waited, his face turned. The hoofs of the mules clattered over stone and shale.

Currall said, "My brother and I were different, very different . . ." He was silent, re-creating pictures, then he went on as though explaining to himself, "For myself, I was a shy boy, a quiet young man, I found the world rough and savage. When God called me I entered the Church with relief, turning aside from the crudity and violence . . ."

He looked up quickly. "It wasn't *only* a refuge. Don't think that. I wanted to serve the Lord, I wanted His spirit in me—"

"I know, I know." Butrone nodded jerkily, hastening him on.

Currall said, "Robin was twelve years younger than I. When he died he was thirty-eight. I'm fifty. And we were complete opposites. He was—ah, he was a hedonist." He searched for the Spanish expression. "He lived for the world, the external world. You know . . . Wild living and abandon, the flesh, eat, drink, and be merry. You know? He was casual, uncommitted, full of charm and sex . . ." He stopped.

"Yes, I know." Butrone watched him acutely as the mules picked their way on to the crest. There was something more than mere interest in his face, some personal concern.

Currall said at last, "Sometimes I envied him." He was quiet for a moment; the wind carried his words away, swirling the brief confession over the mountainside, into the skies. He mumbled, "I think I felt inadequate before him. Intellectually and with faith, I believed that the plane of the spirit is all that matters. Yet we live in the world, the flesh clothes us, it's so

powerful . . . I wanted to be confident I was right, and his path was wrong, yet always I knew doubts and temptations, and often I feared him as I loved him."

He spoke in a garbled intermingling of English and Spanish; the police chief appeared to comprehend, nodding sagely. "This I appreciate. It's something all men must face in themselves, priests or laity, police chiefs or beggars. We're not given to be whole, we're divided." He addressed Currall directly. "I too know my doubts. I am a man of true faith—but ah, I have sinned. And not all of my confessions and my penances have cleansed me." And the fleshy face with its bagged eyes and shadows was indeed haunted. Butrone said impassionedly, "But we must trust in the infinite mercy of God."

Then he exclaimed impatiently, flinging off the mood, goading the mule to a faster pace. They passed overhanging walls of rock; small stones tumbled, dropping into a bottomless fall on their right. The green silences of the valley were below; above, the sky burnt a bright, glazed blue. Some of the police were arguing and chattering, riding easily on their scrawny beasts.

Butrone called out. "Now be silent. We approach . . ." He turned once more on Currall and his voice lowered. "Tell me the rest."

Currall said, "Robin ended in bad trouble. So he came over to America, worked his passage across here. I heard from him once in a while, and none of the news was good. He was on a long fall down. And yet I realised too clearly, in a way I was eased. As though I were vindicated, justified in my own retreat. Because Robin's way had failed after all, the devil had got him."

"Ah." Butrone ejaculated a low monosyllable. "And so he died . . ."

Currall said with sudden harsh and breaking despair, in a voice like the splintering of dry wood, "Then I repented of my own narrowness and my own cowardice. Then I wanted God only if I could be still a man, and have a man's mortal strength. Not yet has this come to me . . ." His head sagged.

"And your brother?"

"I came because I owed it to Robin, because I knew I had been wrong. I wanted to find purpose, that God had been near him to the end. Because I knew suddenly that I was no better than he after all, no more deserving of consolation and mercy at the last. I wanted to find the forgiveness of God, for him and for myself."

"You know what the prisoner told us."

"I'm trying to believe he was wrong. That if indeed Robin chose death for himself, he did it in self-sacrifice and glory,

God-guided, not in destruction and ultimate ruin. I pray for this . . . That's why I must find Anduze."

" In half an hour's time we'll be there," Butrone said. " I too hope your brother died a good death. With the mortal courage you yourself seek, and in the consciousness of God as well. Then perhaps I also shall find such peace, for I too know the desolation of the forsworn."

Currall stared at him sharply. They rode on, through the quiet of the mountain.

Then the hut lay below them, two hundred yards distant upon the flank of the mountain. A police guard greeted Butrone as they arrived. " He's still there. He hasn't tried to get away."

They peered cautiously over the rocks. The hut was small and solitary among the earth and sky, set in a clearing on the open slope. It had mud walls and a thatched roof; at the rear was an enclosure where a cooking-pot stood on the ashes of a fire. All appeared deserted.

Currall gazed fixedly; Butrone gripped his arm. " They shot your brother in that yard." His voice had lost its earlier fierceness and rudeness, and it was almost soft. " But they buried him decently, beneath the bushes. Unusual that, for them . . ." A few yards from the hut was a group of dry thorns.

Currall thought of the long, melancholic journey which came later, the slow travelling of the coffin to the British cemetery, where he had stood at the graveside . . . His tongue moved over his lips but now he was strangely calm; with a quiet which came either from inspiration or from final despair, and he was not sure which. He asked, " What's your intention? "

" Advance on him. He's armed—but so are we."

" You're certain it's Anduze who is there? "

" Of course."

" He may fight back until he's dead."

" What else can we do? "

Currall suggested rapidly, " Let me go down first. I have to talk to him."

" You're crazy—he would kill you. He'll be wild and berserk like a trapped beast."

" Let me go. Before God, I have to go."

Butrone watched his strained, lighted face. Then he said, " Then go, Mister Currall." He fumbled for the automatic in his holster; then he glanced understandingly at Currall again, and refastened the flap.

Currall moved forward into the descent. He could not clear in his mind the driving reason for his going. His knees were shaking and he was confused, almost dazed. Behind him he

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heard the police chief whisper, "May it go well, my friend." The low voice was sombre as though addressing the dead.

He began walking down to the hut, his feet sliding in the shale. He drew nearer; at any instant he expected to hear the crack of a gun or feel the pain tear his chest, feel his face burst into agony. Imaginations of hurt and fearful injury tormented him. Still he kept going, and now he was shaking his head furiously, striving to be sure.

And then like mist vanishing, the confusion disappeared. Like a bright light shining, all was revealed: and he knew he was doing this indeed for love of Robin, in prayer for Robin, and in quest of his own lost manhood within the Church . . .

Currall came up to the entrance to the hut. A wind stirred over the slopes, rustling across the ground and carrying grasses and dust. The day was falling to afternoon and shadows slanted over the hut walls. Flakes of ash from the fire in the yard slithered reptile-like over the dry ground towards Currall's boots. No life breathed.

Currall took a deep, convulsive gasp. He stepped forward, and his black shadow crossed the open doorway of the hut. Then he was inside.

The hut was bare. On the earth floor a man squatted with his back to the plastered wall. This man was unshaven and dirty, with matted black hair, and he aimed a rifle across his knees at Currall.

Currall stood still, and his stomach curled up. For a long moment neither of them spoke. Then the man on the floor asked in a husky, thickened voice, " Who are you? "

Currall said slowly, " My name is Bernard Currall."

A change went over the dark, brilliant eyes of the man who crouched in the light from the doorway. He frowned; his gaze passed over Currall, taking him in. And Currall stared back fixedly at the huddled, shapeless figure of the bandit: grimy shirt and trousers, a bare, primitive face which showed the blending of Spanish and Indian bloods, its strong nose and tight lips, piercing black eyes amid the tangle of hair. And he stared at the steady muzzle of the rifle, peering down a dark tunnel into eternal life, or eternal death.

At last the bandit said, " I remember that name."

" You shot my brother here, a month ago." His voice was surprisingly level.

" Yes. Yes, I did." And Anduze's voice was as even, and it was intelligent.

Currall's tongue touched his lips again for an instant; the bandit's eyes darted to the quick movement, gaining information. But then Currall said firmly, " I came to talk to you."

Anduze glanced beyond the doorway. " With the police? "

" They're up on the hill."

" Hah . . . What do you want? "

" I told you—to talk to you. About my brother."

The bandit's tight face split into a grimace. " Now I'll shoot you as I shot him."

" No," Currall said. " I want to ask you something."

Anduze began to push himself upright, his back against the wall, his hands gripping the rifle. " Now I'm going to shoot you." His eyelids were dropping. He was crouched, short and lithe below Currall; his mouth was wrenched into a distorted shape of savagery and desperation.

" No," Currall repeated. " Give me the gun." He held out his hand.

Anduze's long brown fingers curled on the trigger. Currall was numb in shock and tension, and his numbness had a dream quality, as though he were playing some remembered scene. But yet he was conscious of the cold panic and fear deeper within him, and the fierce effort which kept these battened down, he was conscious as the patient is aware of the pain beneath the drug.

He took a step forward. And the finger began to move with the trigger. Currall was still. Then he said firmly, " In the name of God, give me the gun."

Suddenly the rifle clattered to the mud floor. Anduze's hands

swept over his face; then he was weeping noisily, shuddering. At last he staggered forward, dropping to his knees before Currall. His hand shaped an unsteady cross. His voice was ragged and frantic. "*Bless me, Father, I have sinned . . .*"

They knelt together on the rough floor. Currall said soberly, "You know I'm not of your Church. I can give you no absolution."

Now Anduze was quiet; his brown, stark face was composed in some desperation, in acceptance. His fingers fumbled in his trouser-pocket; then he brought out a rosary. Currall stared strangely, bewildered and disturbed, watching the long, bony fingers of the murderer of his brother pass reverently over the small beads.

Currall repeated at last, "I want you to tell me what happened." Now, as though some force aided him, his tongue did not falter over the Spanish, and his voice came strongly.

Anduze gazed at the beads, his neck bent, his head lowered. "He came to me," he said. "He was shabby, and when we took the coach he was half drunk. But he came up to me, here in the hut, and he asked me if it was true I was going to shoot one of them. And I told him I would shoot indeed . . . Then he said none would lose by his passing, and he made me choose him."

Currall demanded terribly, "How was he?"

"He was brave. The other passengers were contemptuous of him as a—soak, but he saved them all. A brave man—I didn't want to shoot him. At first I refused . . ."

Bitter anger shook Currall. "Then why did you?"

The smooth-skinned face showed a righteous sense of injury. "I *had* to shoot him. I had declared one would die. I couldn't lose face, it would have been my end." Then his expression shattered: he dropped his head in his hands and began weeping again.

Currall demanded again, "How did he die?" And he waited, squatting on the hard earth in the smelly gloom, racked by tension and hurt.

The narrow shoulders trembled. Anduze said brokenly, "He died like a man. He was upright and unafraid."

Currall's voice was a whisper. "He died alone?"

And the bandit seemed to understand. "Because he was a brave man I offered to fetch a priest from the valley. This I would have done—but he refused. He said he had a brother who would pray for him. And so I told them to shoot."

Currall remained still, transfixed by a fearsome shaft of anguish and passion. And somehow he knew what would follow.

Anduze lifted a stricken head, and then he howled like a

forsaken dog. "I saw God with him. As I shot him, I saw God." And then he broke into louder weeping, tearing sobs which rent him.

The fear and despair flowed out of Currall, through some gaping wound. He was washed by a vast, healing flood of relief, almost of joy. After a long while he said, "Why are you here?"

Anduze clung to the rosary, to the crucifix. "I couldn't kill again. I'd no stomach, no guts. My men turned and spat on me, and then they left me. I came back here because—because I wanted him to forgive. As I want you to forgive. Oh brother, oh priest—" And he flung himself against Currall again, the greasy black hair against Currall's chest, against the black cloth.

Then Currall got to his feet. He said slowly, "I forgive . . . Now we'd better go back."

The bandit stood up unsteadily. He looked outside, into the late afternoon sunlight over the crest; he hesitated, and then he muttered, "It's over. Yes, I will come with you."

They walked outside, and began to climb up towards the windswept boulders where Butrone and the police waited. They walked silently, with quiet footsteps, away from the hut and the yard where death had been. As they drew close Currall saw Butrone's face, and saw the shock of surprise on it turn to a rising of awe and respect, and then to wonder again.

Anduze shuffled beside him, and Currall walked valiantly like a man transfigured, climbing upwards. Because his brother had found purpose in his end and now he had found it for himself, with fresh courage and humility.

They came up to the police. Anduze was suddenly laughing, tempestuously free. "So here I go. So here, praying and priest-ridden, I go. Ah, strange is the world and almighty is God . . ." And still frantically laughing, he stepped on.

And Currall found his own unsteady laughter, hysterical with relief and excitement, in Butrone's still face. "It's over," he said. And they went on, back towards the place where the mules were waiting for the return journey.

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★ *Michael Barrett read the psychological works of Jung and Adler while his school contemporaries were still on comics. After working as an engineering student and doing time in the R.E.M.E. he had a series of variegated jobs—in an aircraft factory, in the War Office, and as a tutor. Meanwhile he was writing hard, stories for magazines, poetry (as yet unpublished) and five novels. He's already sold the film rights of three of them; the last one, The Man on the Spike, came out this year.*

BOBO

" Well now," I said,
" aren't you the smart little operator ! "

BY LELAND WEBB

ONE TIME, I remember, Bobo was checking in one of the truck drivers, and the boss and half a dozen others were at one end of the office bellowing at each other, brazen as bulls. This happened every afternoon, and you could hardly think—let alone hear—in the racket they made. Bobo stopped counting money and, reaching into the deep drawer of his desk, he took out a large paper bag; and from the bag he drew out a bugle. He stood up and blew a crude but recognisable rendering of taps.

In the paralysed silence that followed he wiped the mouthpiece, put the bugle into the bag, and put the bag back into the desk drawer. " Gentlemen," he said, " may we have a deathly hush, if you please? "

This happened five years ago—Bobo has been gone for almost three—but late in the afternoon when the drivers check in, it is still pretty quiet in the office.

I remember also that Bobo brought a flower each Monday morning to Miss Mole, our book-keeper. Sometimes he brought a calla lily, sometimes a camellia, but usually a large and lovely rose. Miss Mole—really Molesworth, but she would make you think of a mole—was and still is a plain girl with a dreadful personality, but I remember that once a week, at least for an hour, she bloomed like a flower herself. She couldn't sustain it for longer than an hour, but it still seems to me that for a little while on Monday mornings she is more tolerable than at any other time.

Bobo once said to me, " Deep down within Miss Mole, buried under that horrid disposition, there is a sweet and lovely child whom no one has ever seen. And what the hell—the flower costs me nothing."

He explained. He lived near Peacehaven Cemetery, and on Sunday afternoon he would stroll through and select one of the best flowers from a grave. He would take it home and put it in a glass of water and keep it overnight. Miss Mole never knew, and so far I have restrained the malice she induces in everyone who deals with her and have not told her the truth.

Bobo's full name, in all its total improbability, was Duncan St. Clair Fitzroy LeMaistre. Until he was twenty-one his name was Henry LeMaistre, but having to secure a birth certificate for some reason or other, he found that his name had not been entered on his birth certificate. As he had never cared for the name Henry, he decided to rename himself with something more suitable to his aristocratic surname.

"Besides, it doesn't matter—everybody calls me Bobo," he said on his first day with us, and we never called him anything else. I remember he sent us a postcard when he was on holiday and he signed it *Bobo*, so apparently the nickname pleased him.

Bobo worked for our branch office of the Bannon Brewing Company, makers of Bannon's beer, for nearly two years. He would be with us still were it not for fourteen thousand, three hundred and eighty-five dollars which he took—the word "stole" simply will not fit—from us, for which he is now serving a ten-year sentence at the state penitentiary.

Booker T., who visits him faithfully once a month, tells me that he has adjusted himself and seems to be quite popular with guards and inmates alike; so I know he is still spreading about him his even measure of awe and dismay and delight.

Although I caught particular hell for engaging Bobo, it would be more accurate to say that he simply came to work for us. As office manager I had placed an ad in the Sunday paper for a night office man, and on Monday morning there were about twenty or thirty applicants waiting for me when I arrived.

I put them all out in the warehouse at a long table and gave them the company questionnaire to fill in. This would keep them busy for an hour or more, and I returned to my desk. An hour later I went back into the warehouse and there was only one person there.

He stood up when I came in. He was a small fellow, barely five feet, and swarthy. I remember I thought in quick succession of a child, a hummingbird, a gipsy; of innocence, motion, and guile. And I didn't remember him among the group I had ushered out to the table.

"Where are all the other men?" I asked him.

"Well, it hardly seemed fair to waste their time on questionnaires and interviews," he said. "There's only one job and I need it. So I told them I was a nephew of the boss and had got the job. I told them to go out by the warehouse door so as not to disturb you."

I stared at him. He stood poised on the balls of his feet, and I think if I had shouted he would have flown out of the warehouse door too.

"Well now," I said, "aren't you the smart little operator!"

"Yes, sir," he said. "I am smart and I am an operator. But I do need this job, and the deed is done. Please don't be angry. Give me the job and let's live happily ever after."

And he gave me a look in which there was impudence and mischief. But at the same time it was so timid and fearful and pleading that instead of losing my temper I burst out laughing.

"All right," I said. "If I had any sense at all, I'd kick you out of here, but you're hired. But play the smart alec with me again and you'll still wind up on the toe of my shoe."

"Yes, sir," he said. "I aim to please."

And please he did. In less than a week he was indispensable. We have never had, before or since, anyone who could turn out the amount of work that Bobo did. And the work was flawless. I soon learnt it was superfluous to check any piece of his work, and I simply sent the reports to the head office and the deposits to the bank without even bothering to take a look at them.

Bobo came to work at a quarter to twelve each day. I soon learnt to stop what I was doing as the door opened and he appeared in it. He would stand for a moment in the doorway taking us in, sizing us up, and then he would lift one hand high in the air, making a flowing, papal gesture.

"Pax vobiscum, fellow mice," he would say, hanging up his coat. "This will be a wonderful day. I have made up my head."

He then would walk into the office and take his seat, and, swinging his chair round, he would deliver a series of observations as captivating as they were irrelevant.

Like, "What do the birds do when they feel death approaching? I've never seen a bird dead from natural causes—one that has lived out its appointed time and fallen to the ground, wings stilled, heart stopped, dead. Do they seek out some dim, deep, dark recess of the forest, huddle down, close those bright, sharp eyes, and die as quaintly beautiful as they live?"

Or, "Once I worked for a Mr. Lazaroff, a nice old Russian, and he used to say 'inerta worts,' a cryptic phrase that baffled me for a long time. He would tell me something and then he would say 'inerta worts' and repeat what he had said. I thought it was a thing like 'selah' in the Bible, or like the word 'capeesh' the Italians use. And then one day it dawned on me what the old fellow was saying. He was saying 'in other words,' and I've always been sorry I found it out. 'Inerta worts' was such a magical, mysterious phrase, and I felt I had lost something."

And once Bobo said something that I was to remember later most clearly. "The only thing wrong with money is what you

have to do to make it. After all, what does it take to make a million bucks but a combination of ignorance and bad manners, and perhaps a pinch of snivelling cunning? You could do it, I could do it, but it's too boring, too really sickening. No, sir, that's why we silently applaud a thief and are always ashamed of a self-made man."

After one of these pronouncements he would plunge into his work. As his job was peculiar to our business, I must describe it in order to give a clearer understanding of his robberies. He came to work, as I say, at twelve noon, and while the office staff went to lunch he answered the telephone and posted the sales tickets for the previous day. At three o'clock he went to lunch, and when he returned he took the inventory of stock in the warehouse.

Then the lorries started coming in. We operated twelve lorries and he checked in each driver—adding up each man's ticket, verifying it against the load the driver had taken out and the load he had brought back—and counted the money. In our state beer is sold for cash only, and each day he took in sums that varied between six and eight thousand dollars, of which half was in cheques. When the last driver was checked in, he made up the bank deposit and put the money in the safe and locked it. He also made up the daily sales report for the branch, which went to the head office.

The first lorry rolled in around four-thirty in the afternoon and the last one around eight o'clock. The office closed at six and Bobo was alone in it—with Booker T. and Scobie, the two Negro warehousemen, out in the warehouse loading the lorries for the next day's run. After he had made up the deposit, Bobo went out and checked all the lorries to see that they were correctly loaded and then locked up the warehouse and the office.

"Days creep, weeks glide, and the months sail," Bobo once remarked, and this was true; it soon seemed that he had always been with us, working like a demon, chattering away like a mina bird, as though he had been assigned the task of relieving the tedium of our lives. "And what did Bobo say today? Or do?" our wives would ask at supper, and we rarely disappointed them.

One night instead of answering my wife I got up from the table and moved out so she could get a full view of me.

"Do I look like a potato?" I asked. "A snowflake potato?"

She frowned and studied me. "Mm, well, you are short, and you *are* fat," she said, "which does give you a bumpy roundishness like a potato, a very select Idaho. And your white hair looks like the butter on top. I've never heard of a snowflake potato, but it sounds very high-class. What brought this up?"

I sat down again. "That's what Bobo calls me when I'm not around," I said, "so I guess I might as well get used to it."

And years later I am still known as Snowflake Potato. And Mr. Bannon is still known as Old Moosh-a-Moosh. And Hugo Gormley, the branch manager, is known as Mickle the Turkle. These are the titles Bobo bestowed on us. I can't speak for the others, but I wear mine proudly.

Mickle the Turkle sounds like a creature both absurd and terrifying. It fits Hugo Gormley to a T. About the size of a water buffalo, Hugo goes through life butting and bellowing, and though he will scare you half to death he has never harmed a living soul.

He bellowed at Bobo only once. Bobo had typed a letter for him and had changed "irregardless" to "regardless." Hugo came out of his office snorting with rage, in a manner we now refer to as "turkling."

"I know I'm only the boss here," he shouted, "and I ought to be used to having my orders disobeyed and my wishes flouted at every turn. But I will not do my own typing!

"I give you ten minutes to retype this letter exactly as I wrote it. When I mean 'regardless' I will *write* 'regardless,' although I don't know what it means and I don't want to know. The word is *irregardless*, and if you can't spell it, look it up in the dictionary."

He tore Bobo's copy into little pieces and threw them on Bobo's desk and went back into his office, where we could hear him muttering to himself. Bobo got the dictionary, opened it to the *I*s and spoke up, his high, clear voice reaching easily to Hugo's office.

"My dear sir," he said, "I am willing to endure your bad manners and ill temper. As a matter of fact, I enjoy them. But I will not suffer your ignorance. I have the dictionary open at the *I*s and I will read to you what it says concerning the word 'irregardless.' It says, quote, 'a sub-standard or humorous redundancy,' unquote. Am I to understand that you prefer an inferior and utterly useless neologism in the place of the legitimate word 'regardless,' or am I to understand that you write in a jesting mood?"

Hugo emerged from his office. "Is that dictionary worth a damn?"

"It is one of the very best," Bobo said. "Most dictionaries do not list 'irregardless' at all."

"I never could spell," Hugo said. "I was twenty-five years old before I quit putting an *e* on the end of 'go.'"

"I accept your apology," Bobo said, "and I'll retype your

letter. But you'll have to pick up the rubbish you put on my desk." He indicated the torn-up copy.

"Like hell you will," Hugo said. He picked up the scraps of paper and put them in the wastebasket. He took a typewriter into his office and spent the rest of the afternoon typing the letter with two fingers. And he never bellowed at Bobo again.

This was Bobo as he was when he lived among us. Now for the money he stole, how he stole it, how he was caught, where the money was found and his exit from our lives into legend.

I want to fix this scene. It is late at night. The office staff has gone and the last driver has been checked in. Bobo is quite alone. For two hours he will be busy writing the daily sales report and preparing the bank deposit. Out in the warehouse, more than a hundred feet away, their view of the office blocked by stacks of beer cases, Booker T. and Scobie will be equally busy loading the lorries. They have been told to stay out of the office unless summoned; they are good men and will obey. Until Bobo comes out to check the lorryloads they will be unaware of him.

The warehouse lies outside the city limits; there are no street lights and very little traffic. A police car makes an occasional patrol and the railway detective makes regular, predictable rounds to check the freight cars. There is no nightwatchman; Old Man Bannon didn't make his money to throw it away on unnecessary expense.

Booker T. is a tall man, sober and mournful in expression. He says he is in his sixties and he may be, but he loads the lorries with no apparent effort. He is devout and humble, and his religion is of his own invention—based in part on the Bible which he reads during every free moment, and in part on his own melancholy conclusions concerning human nature.

"'Be ye therefore perfect,'" he quotes, and then adds, "a man tries to be good but he has to live in *this* world."

Scobie is young, and with his shock of straight, jet-black hair, his narrow face and long, narrow eyes, I suspect a strain of Hindu. He talks constantly in a nervous flow of speech that cannot be stopped. We have never doubted that Scobie is quite mad, but he is a good worker, he makes us laugh and it doesn't matter.

Of no importance, I hope I will convince you, is the fact that Bobo made a dollar and twenty cents an hour to count thousands of dollars each night—and thus perhaps drew certain untenable conclusions as he compared the sum he kept with the sum he counted.

Once he said, "There is nothing—oh, absolutely nothing—

more exhilarating than a big juicy robbery where the thief escapes scot free. Remember Brink's? I tell you, a sigh of disappointment went up the whole world round when they caught the robbers."

And when he rang me up on the night of the first robbery, I caught a note of exhilaration in his quiet, measured tones. "I have grave news to impart," he said. "I have been robbed at gunpoint. I have called the police and a car is on the way. I have phoned the Turkle and he says for you to come on out. Needless to say, I'll be here when you arrive."

When I got there he had told his story once to the police and once to Hugo. He told it again to me, and the police listened to him very attentively. Bobo spoke soberly but he made no pretence that he was not enjoying his role.

He had heard a car pull up outside one of the windows. He thought nothing of this; people often pulled off the road there to check a tyre or a headlight. Then a voice spoke to him and he looked up. A man's face was at the window, his hands were on the windowsill, and in one of his hands was a gun. He indicated that Bobo should open the window, and when this was done he spoke. Very politely.

"This is a holdup," he said. "The gun is loaded."

"Yes, sir, I see that it is," Bobo said. "And I hope you understand that I am at your service."

They discussed the money that was now locked in the safe. Bobo thought it wise to explain that our safe was an old one and the combination very tricky, and that he had never been able to open it first try.

"And if you threaten me," he said, "you'll just upset me and I'll never get it open."

"If it doesn't open the first time, try it again," the man said. "And if it doesn't open at the third try, you're dead."

For the first time Bobo opened the safe first try. The man passed the money to someone behind him, telling him to check it. Minutes passed, this someone spoke, and the man in the window nodded.

"You've been a good boy," he told Bobo. "I hope you don't catch too much hell about this."

He disappeared from the window, a car door slammed, and when Bobo got to the window all he could see was a vanishing tail-light. He went out to the warehouse and told Booker T. and Scobie. He returned to the office and called the police, Hugo, and me.

What did the man look like? He had stood in the dark, Bobo in the light. He wore a hat, so all that could be said was that his

hair was neither fair nor red. Bobo thought and thought about it, but he could recall no scars, birthmarks, or any physical peculiarities like a big nose or large ears, or any sort of tic.

"He looked like everybody else," he said, "only more so."

A perfectly ordinary-looking man, then? The police kept asking this over and over until Bobo became restless.

"No man with a gun in his hand pointed directly at the centre of your forehead could ever look quite ordinary," he said.

The police immediately suspected Bobo as an accomplice. And so did I. I spent a nervous morning belatedly checking on his employment record, but all his former employers spoke highly of him. We hired a man to stay with him for a while and the police watched Bobo's every move. But finally Old Man Bannon protested at the expense of a guard, and the police, finding nothing, relaxed their attention. We returned to our former easy ways.

Six weeks passed, and my telephone rang and Bobo said, "Come out. I have had visitors again." And he hung up.

He was grim and tight-lipped as he told his second tale. A knock had come on the door. A voice had said it was the police. Such visits had become commonplace since the first robbery, so Bobo opened the door.

Two men pushed inside quickly. Neither looked like the first robber. One was short, stocky, and balding, with sandy hair and pale blue eyes. The other was thin and slight with a deeply cleft chin. Bobo would be able to identify them anywhere.

They said nothing. The stocky man pushed Bobo down in a chair and stood over him while the thin one was busy at the safe. The safe had not yet been locked, so it was all over in less than five minutes. They left, still without a word, but the short man paused at the door and fixed Bobo with a look of such cold cruelty that he sat for ten minutes in terror after the door closed behind them. He thought it possible that he might have fainted.

Booker T., standing inside the warehouse putting beer cases on the loading track, and Scobie, standing inside a truck stacking them, saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. The police were now confirmed in their suspicions, and ready to give Bobo a going-over. But a champion entered the lists to stand between them and Bobo.

This was Hugo—who in his own way was as crazy as Scobie. Sooner or later Hugo made up his mind and then closed it, and he could not be shaken from any stand taken. He listened to the police with mounting impatience and then calmly and infuriatingly dismissed them.

"The boy has always behaved himself here," he said, "and

except for being nuts on the subject of words, he is sound. I don't even want to hear of such cheap and vicious slander, and if you bother him, I'll sue you for false arrest."

As the saying goes, "The boss may be right or the boss may be wrong, but he is always the boss," and Hugo Gormley had spoken. Bobo offered to resign but Hugo would not hear of it.

"I know you didn't take the money," he said, "and you know you didn't. No further proof is required."

Three months later we were robbed for the third time. Bobo called us, this time choosing a voice broken and wet with tears. As I move now to his finish—to his downfall, if that was what it was—I will tell it not as he told it but as it happened . . .

Booker T. had sent Scobie the last case of beer for the last lorry when the lights went out in the office. Puzzled, he whistled to Scobie, who came into the warehouse and stood with him, for once hushed. They stood in uneasy silence, their uneasiness growing towards panic. And as they prepared to flee, Bobo came to the door leading from the office into the warehouse and in a very loud voice called Booker T. and Scobie to him. The lights being off, Bobo stood in darkness. When they arrived at the door, Bobo told them he was being held up at the point of a gun. He told them that they were to come inside and go into the boss' office and lie down on the floor. He told them that his life and theirs depended on their obedience. Badly frightened, Booker T. and Scobie went quickly into the office and lay down. The door was closed and they huddled close to each other, keeping quiet, listening.

They heard the quick movement of feet in the outer office, heard desk drawers open and shut, heard the safe door open and bang shut, heard whispers. And finally in terror they heard the front door open and close and footsteps approaching their door. When the door opened Scobie moaned, and then Bobo said, "All right, boys, it's all over. They've gone and you can get up now."

Booker T. and Scobie came out, blinking in the now lighted office. Scobie saw the money first—a package of tens and a package of twenties lying on the floor. He picked them up and waved them.

"Man left it, man left it," he shouted. "Let's see if that fool left some more!" He ran all over the office but found nothing. "How much money I got here, Mr. Bobo?" he asked, and when Bobo told him each wrapper contained five hundred dollars he was beside himself. "Great glory, Scobie got five hundred dollars in each of his hands!" And he frolicked all over the office, waving the money.

Bobo stopped him in his tracks. "Scobie, you and Booker T. can have it if you want it," he said. "The company's insured and no one will ever know the man left it. I'll never tell anybody."

"You say keep it?" Scobie said, holding the money up and looking at it. "Mr. Bobo, you said something. You hear what Mr. Bobo said, Booker T.?"

"I heard what Mr. Bobo said," Booker T. said gravely, "and I heard what the preacher said. He said, 'Thou shalt not steal,' and he meant what he said. You want to steal that money, boy?"

Scobie was confused. "We got a chance to keep this money and don't take it? Not even if it don't hurt nobody? Nobody?"

"You want to steal that money, say yes or say no," Booker T. said.

"Hell, yes!" Scobie said fiercely. "'Course I want to steal it."

"Well, then, boy," Booker T. said, "pass me those twenties and you keep the tens. I just wanted to know how you felt about it."

After Booker T. and Scobie had concealed their loot in the warehouse, Bobo called the police, then the boss, and then me. He told his tale of a repetition of the second robbery, by the very same men, the only variation being the passive participation of Booker T. and Scobie. He didn't seem to be particularly interested in the story he told and he told it carelessly, as if it were a subject that had begun to bore him.

Booker T. and Scobie didn't come to work the next day and the police went looking for them. They picked up Scobie three days later and a hundred miles away. He still had eight of the ten-dollar bills in his pocket. He was roaring drunk and gave them no trouble.

All he would say was, "Had the whale of a time, gentlemen and jurymen, had the whale of a time. Live a thousand years or die tomorrow, Scobie had him a time, time, time."

Booker T. was found by noon of the day after the robbery; as soon as the police got around to going where he lived, they found him sitting on the porch. Nothing was recovered from him. He had got up that morning, dressed in his Sunday black, and had walked through the Negro section of town like a saint of old, dispensing alms in twenty-five separate gifts. When the police asked him to whom he had given it, he shook his head, reproving, magisterial.

"To the poor and the needy," he said, "to the sick, the lame, the halt, and the blind, to the widow, to the orphan. Better *be* good than *do* good, but better *do* good than do nothing. Soon's

I saw the money I was saddened because I knew I was meant to take it. I'm still sad, but twenty-five people will have their little spell of content. And the Lord—He won't be smiling, but He'll twinkle behind his frown."

The police said nothing to us about Booker T. They waited until they found Scobie. I sat in the office while they told Hugo about it. He sat inert as a big stone, and when they had finished he said to me, "Is this true?"

It was a child's question, but it was asked by a man.

"Yes, Hugo, I'm afraid it is," I said.

He went to the door and opened it. "Bobo," he called. "Come here, sonny."

Bobo came into the office. It was the only time I've seen the police close in on a man, and it's a curious thing. They like the people they arrest—burglars, thieves, pickpockets, perhaps even murderers. They like them as they do not like us, who do no more than break traffic rules or get too drunk. I swear there was fondness and genuine affection in their looks and voices when they spoke to Bobo, perhaps even admiration.

"Son, we've got Booker T. and we've got Scobie and they've talked," the senior officer said. "Do you feel like talking to us now?"

"Well, mercy, yes," Bobo said. "I wondered how long you were going to make me wait."

There was no questioning. Bobo took charge of the conversation and kept it. There had been no robberies, of course—he had simply taken the money.

"Why?" Hugo asked.

Bobo looked at him. "Because it was there," he explained.

"Where is it now?" the senior officer asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," Bobo said. "And don't ask me to be. The money is five miles and three months away, and it will be found but you won't find it."

They took him away then. He never told them where the money was, although I imagine he was grilled many times. The police combed the warehouse, they ransacked his apartment, but in the end they had to give up.

We took Booker T. and Scobie back, recovering their share of the money by weekly deductions of five dollars from their pay. They still load the lorries for us, and more than likely they always will. Booker T. will say nothing about what he did with the money, only look very wise, but Scobie has recited his epic journey a thousand times, adding more women, more fights, and more whisky with each telling.

Bobo got ten years. Hugo was beside himself, engaging a lawyer for him and going to see him often. He still refuses to accept Bobo's guilt and makes preposterous hints that the boy was framed or was protecting someone else. We do not mention Bobo in his presence, as it will send him into a sullen rage for the rest of the day.

Miss Mole found the money. She was the first to take an adding-machine tape from the twelfth layer of the big packing box we had opened on the day of the third robbery. She had cried out like a wounded water bird and her silly face broke up. I went over, and there between the twelfth and thirteenth layers I saw the colour of the notes. Hugo and I removed the layer of tapes and counted the money. Except for what Booker T. and Scobie had taken, it was all there.

Five miles and three months away, Bobo had said. Now I have not checked it, but if you take a hundred or more rolls of tape—about what we use in three months—unroll them and lay them end to end, they may measure five miles. It was thirteen weeks after the third robbery that Miss Mole found she needed a new tape, and we had reached the twelfth layer.

Finding the money made no difference. Bobo was just as guilty as ever. There was no way he could prove, and he didn't try, that he hadn't concealed the money in order to remove it later. Hugo and Mr. Bannon had a violent quarrel because Hugo wanted to drop the charges and take Bobo back on the payroll. The day Bobo was sentenced, Hugo went home and stayed for three days.

Booker T. visits Bobo once a month. Before he goes, Hugo calls him into his office and closes the door. They have a long talk, and I expect Hugo gives him a message for Bobo. When Booker T. returns, Hugo calls him in again and they talk some more. And afterwards Hugo is in a good humour, which is almost as hard to bear as Hugo in a rage but it is more cheerful.

We have had five other men since Bobo's time. The present incumbent is a good fellow and he does a competent job. He earns the money we pay him, and if he is not Bobo, neither is anybody else, and we don't hold it against him.

For the rest of our lives we will talk about Bobo. The subject can never be exhausted. We ask a thousand whys, give a thousand answers, and return to it as baffled as ever.

Why did he let Booker T. and Scobie have the money? He could have sat tight, and when all the sniffing and snooping died down, resigned and gone away, taking the money with him. It would have been so easy to do. And so easy to understand.

And we ask, was Bobo crazy? Many say so but none, I think,

are deceived. Sometimes I think that there were only two people in this whole affair who were not crazy—Hugo, who keeps his faith, and Bobo himself.

I will not say it out loud, but I ask myself, Was Bobo saying something to us all? The messages of Booker T. and Scobie, the separate ones of saint and drunkard, are simple enough to decipher. Or so I thought, and I said something of this nature to Booker T. He smiled.

"Yes, sir," he said, "but don't deceive yourself about who be the saint and who the drunkard. Remember, I did good. Scobie *was* good, in the only way the Lord made him to be good."

Life is a daily proposition; I go to work, I pay my bills as best I can, I obey the laws, I love my wife and my children, and I get along with my fellow man the very best I can. But at odd times come a quarter to twelve, I swing round in my swivel chair and look at the closed front door. Look long enough, hard enough—I can't do it every day—and Bobo stands on the threshold, impudent and mischievous, holding up a finger.

"Now, looky here, fellow mouse," he says, "after Bobo you must try to do better. The world is not for money, and life is not as mean and dull and petty as you make it, and I am the proof. I had a pound of money and could have kept it. Instead I played a joke with it, cut a fine caper, gave you a frolic you'd better not forget. Inerta worts, remember Bobo. And laugh. And live. And love."

If he was not saying that, then what? I swear we must do better.

Miss Mole's birthday is tomorrow. She will be forty years old. I can hardly bear the woman. But yesterday I bought a black lace nightgown, the most sinful I could find, and a small bottle of perfume with an outrageously wicked name, and I had them wrapped with almost a mile of ribbon in the bow. I shall say nothing to her about it being her birthday, but when she starts home at the end of the day tomorrow, I shall give them to her.

It will be the silliest thing I have ever done—the silliest thing, certainly, that any man has ever done since time began. Perhaps. But I have held out against Bobo as long as I can.

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NO HOLDS BARD

A poet is a person who tells the truth about something that never happened.

Duel Purpose

Let the foils be brought.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

As I went down through Dublin City
At the hour of twelve of the night,
Who-did-I-see-but-a-Spanish-lady
Washing her feet by candle light.
First she washed them,
Then she dried them,
All by a fire of amber coals,
In all my life I never did see
A maid so neat about the soles . . .

But when I came to where I found her,
And set her down from the halted coach,
Who was there waiting, his arms folded,
But that fatal swordsman, Tiger Roach?
Then blades were out,
And 'twas thrust and cut,
And never wrist gave more affright,
Till I lay low upon the floor
Where she stood holding the candle light.

PADRAIC COLUM, *Dublin: The Old Squares*

Iron Duke

Stiff gentlemen waited on one another; solemn memoranda were drawn up; the Duke [of Wellington] demanded "that satisfaction . . . which a gentleman has a right to require, and which a gentleman never refuses to give;" and in the mist of a March morning he rode out to Battersea. The Duke was punctual, and his opponent kept him waiting. A round-eyed

doctor, fetched early out of bed, recognised his formidable patient, who cheerfully remarked, "Well, I dare say you little expected it was I who wanted you to be here." Then they rode up and down till Winchilsea arrived; and the little party—four gentlemen, a doctor, and a case of pistols—proceeded on foot to a quiet corner. The Duke turned to his second.

"Now then, Hardinge, look sharp and step out the ground. I have no time to waste. Damn it! don't stick him up so near the ditch. If I hit him, he will tumble in . . ."

A steady voice said "Fire;" and the Duke raised his pistol. But Winchilsea's was still pointing at the ground. The Duke paused for an instant, fired, and hit his coat. Then Winchilsea fired in the air. His second flourished a paper, which contained a withdrawal of the offensive charge. The Duke listened carefully. "This won't do," he said, "it is no apology." Then someone pencilled in the mystic word; the Duke distributed a chilly bow to each of his adversaries, lifted two fingers to his hat, and rode away.

PHILIP GUEDALLA, *The Duke*

Trigger-happy

It has a strange, quick jar upon the ear,
That cocking of a pistol, when you know
A moment more will bring the sight to bear
Upon your person, twelve yards off or so.

LORD BYRON, *Don Juan*

Rapier-Keen

"Don't misunderstand me, gentlemen," continued d'Artagnan, drawing himself up to his full height. At that moment the sun's rays shone on him and showed up the bold, clear-cut outlines of his face. "I wish to apologise humbly in advance because I realise now that I may not be able to fulfil my debt of honour to you all. Monsieur Athos has the first claim on my life, a fact which greatly reduces the value of your claim, Monsieur Porthos, and makes yours virtually nil, Monsieur Aramis. So, gentlemen, let me repeat my apologies to you on that score and on that score alone. And now on guard, please! Let's waste no more time."

With these words d'Artagnan drew his sword from its scabbard in the most elegant manner possible, like a courtier born and bred.

The young man was in a wild state of excitement. At that moment he would have challenged all the musketeers in France as boldly and coolly as he had challenged Athos, Porthos, and Aramis.

ALEXANDRE DUMAS, *The Three Musketeers*

Wild Boys

" You know, dear, our boys are often very wild, and they have a game they play when they are at the end of their tether for something to do when quartered in some hopeless outpost—a kind of blind-man's buff—only it is all in the dark, and the blind man stands in the middle of the room and the rest clap hands, and then dodge and he fires his revolver at the point the sound seems to come from, and the object is not to get shot. You may have noticed Sasha Basmanoff has no left thumb? He lost it last year on just such a night."

ELINOR GLYN, *His Hour*

Solemn Gentlemen

Primrose Hill on an April evening
Even now in a fevered London
Sings a vesper sweet; but these
Will try another music. Hark!
These are the pistols; let us test them;—quite perfect.
Montgomery, Macnamara, six paces, two faces;
Montgomery, Macnamara—both speaking together
In nitre and lead, the style is incisive,
Montgomery fallen, Macnamara half-falling,
The surgeon exploring the work of the evening—
And the Newfoundland dogs stretched at home in the firelight.

EDMUND BLUNDEN, *Incident in Hyde Park*, 1803

Either—

When you meet your antagonist, do everything in a mild and agreeable manner.

R. B. SHERIDAN

—Or

Who dares this pair of boots displace
Must meet Bombastes face to face.

W. B. RHODES, *Bombastes Furioso*

SOLO FLIGHT

Travelling had always been a bore to Miss Pringle-Smith

BY DAVID STEWART

THE villagers of Little Muchhampton respected Miss Pringle-Smith who lived in one of the big houses on the main road. Miss Pringle-Smith had lived all her life in the village. She was a leading light in all the village events as had been her father and grandfather. In fact, throughout history there had always been a Pringle-Smith taking part in the village events.

There were records in the county town to show that a Pringle-Smith had taken part in Little Muchhampton's contribution to the Peasant's Revolt; another had fought at Stamford Bridge; and a third had been a Member of the Long Parliament.

There were also records that two female members of the family had shown tendencies slightly frowned upon in those days and had, as a result, been burnt at the stake. No one mentioned those two ladies in the family history, for it has never been fashionable to boast of witches in one's lineage.

In 1916, returning from a regimental party at the depot in the county town, Miss Pringle-Smith made the awful discovery that she had inherited her female forebears' tendencies. She had, one must admit, been drinking some strong punch at the party, as had her escort, a dashing young subaltern of the Regiment. Walking to their carriage, Miss Pringle-Smith had seized his swagger stick and, in a moment of girlish gaiety, tucked it between her knees and proceeded to mime a certain cavalry major.

To her horror and the utter amazement of her escort, she had risen six feet off the ground and done a circuit of the Regiment's Boer War trophies before dropping gently back to earth.

It was an unfortunate happening because the young subaltern was, from that day, deprived of the one solace that makes a soldier see the lighter side of war. He swore off drink for life. It was a short life, for he was killed at Vimy four months later.

Miss Pringle-Smith realised at once what a momentous discovery she had made, but she treated it very carefully. She realised that in the second decade of the twentieth century she would not be burnt at the stake if her tendencies were discovered.

However, at the age of twenty, the thought of the village children dancing gleefully after her, yelling some childish couplet referring to old witch made her determined to keep her secret.

The power which she possessed intrigued her. It would have been most unnatural for any healthy young woman not to practise and exploit it. Often, once her family was asleep, Miss Pringle-Smith would sneak to the broom closet and, selecting a brush, take off round the estate. She had a nasty fright one evening when she found herself silhouetted between the moon and the sights of Charlie Evans' shotgun. Charlie was the village poacher who never missed a chance when the moon was up of going after game.

On another occasion Miss Pringle-Smith found her gift useful when invited out for a moonlight trip in Simon Gaines' new motor carriage. Simon, as might have been expected, drove a long way into the country and then presented the normally terrible alternative—either, or walk home. Miss Pringle-Smith had coolly chosen the latter, soundly smacked her would-be ravisher on the face, and begun walking.

It is unnecessary to say that, once round the first corner and out of sight, she selected a length of yew branch, placed it between her knees and was home before the red mark wore off Simon's face.

She also discovered that her powers were not solely restricted to flying. On the way over the countryside she had remarked angrily, "It would serve him right if he had to walk home." Next morning she discovered that he had. His car had broken down most mysteriously not far from the spot where he had presented his alternative.

The years passed slowly. Miss Pringle-Smith kept to her nocturnal practices, but as she grew older she found that a broom or walking-stick was not the most comfortable means of transport. Occasionally, though, returning from a church meeting or a village function, she found the long walk home tiresome and, tucking her walking-stick into the conventional witch's position, flew home. She was, however, careful that no one ever saw her as other than a kindly old lady.

Last summer she received an invitation from a cousin in America to spend a month or two in the New World. This she was delighted to accept. Travelling had always been a bore to Miss Pringle-Smith so she chose her own medium of travel, that is to say, she decided to go by air. It must be emphasised here that she booked by the conventional method of air travel, an airliner.

The airport was a wonder to the country eyes of Miss Pringle-Smith. She smiled benevolently at the emigration officers, looked squarely and honestly at the customs officials, and affixed herself firmly to the air hostess who led the little line of passengers through the formalities and out to the gigantic plane.

Once on the aircraft Miss Pringle-Smith sat with safety-belt fastened, and gripped the seat and her walking-stick until well after takeoff. She wasn't at all sure that she liked this unnatural power-assisted method of flying. Needless to say, as the adverts all proclaim, Miss Pringle-Smith was taken care of, and had relaxed sufficiently by the time Prestwick was reached to enjoy the experience of landing and then taking off again.

The flight from Prestwick to Gander was uneventful and very comfortable. The charming hostess kept Miss Pringle-Smith well supplied with books and light refreshments. She made quite a friend of the old lady.

Gander in the early hours of the morning did not appeal at all to Miss Pringle-Smith who chose to remain on board while the other passengers stretched their legs. Takeoff again was uneventful, and the smooth climb to altitude made Miss Pringle-Smith quite envious. She had never been able to fly much higher than the top of Birkeep Beacon which was about one thousand feet. Above that height she always felt slightly giddy.

The smooth continuity of the flight was interrupted about three hundred miles from New York when two of the engines suddenly laboured and stopped.

The passengers had barely time to become alarmed, to fumble under the seats for the reassuring touch of life-jackets, to obey the instructions to fasten safety-belts and stop smoking, before another engine cut out.

The reduction in noise brought home to the passengers the inadequacy of the single engine still clawing its way through the atmosphere. The stewards and stewardesses passed constantly up and down the aisle of the cabin reassuring, comforting, and dishing out sweets.

In the flight deck was the calmness of efficiency. The pilot, a senior captain of the airline, sat rigidly at his post. The engineer kept trying one switch after another.

"No good, skipper, it's a leak in the fuel system. We've lost most of our fuel in about four minutes."

The captain spoke into his microphone.

"Jimmy, send out Mayday. Give them a fix and tell 'em I'm coming down to fifteen hundred feet and swinging out to sea for ditching."

He turned to the co-pilot.

"That port outer will burn itself up pretty soon too. Then we'll have to glide. With a kite this size, the glide path is pretty steep. I'd better have a word with the passengers."

He turned a knob in front of him and spoke once more into the microphone. This time his voice was relayed through the loudspeakers in the passenger deck. Concisely and solemnly, he reported the predicament of the aircraft. He requested that all be calm and obey instructions. At the worst there would be a nasty bump as the machine hit the water and then a few hours on the rafts before being rescued.

He switched off the microphone and settled back into his seat with a worried frown on his face.

The deep silence of the cabin was interrupted by an apologetic and stammering chief steward a few minutes later.

"Captain, sir, will you come into the cabin for a moment."

"No, you fool, I can't leave the flight deck."

"Well, sir, I hope you won't have me grounded for this, but I'm perfectly sober and I'm not mad . . ."

"Come on, man; either tell me what you're stammering about or get back to your duties."

"Sir—" the steward swallowed hard— "there's an old lady wants the door opened so she can bale out over land."

"Well, she can't, we don't carry chutes."

"That's what I told her, sir, but she says she doesn't need a chute. She'll fly on her walking-stick."

"That's the last straw, a mad woman on top of this lot."

"She's not mad, sir. She demonstrated to me in the cabin. Did a full circuit of the first-class deck above the seats and made a perfect two-point landing in the galley. Says she's a witch. Comes of a long line of witches. Also says, sir, that even ten minutes in water not above sixty degrees will kill her. She looks pretty frail too, sir."

The captain gave his chief steward a long and peculiar look. "Robert, old man, I've known you for four years, crewed with you for three years, and drunk with you often. If you're pulling a hoax on me I'll kill you, so help me." He grinned for a moment. "I'm probably going to kill us all anyway in about fifteen minutes! Come on, let me see this old witch of yours."

The atmosphere in the passenger cabin was electric. All eyes were riveted on the tiny figure of Miss Pringle-Smith who stood beside the door, nervously clutching her walking-stick.

"Now, madam," said the captain, "what's this my steward tells me?"

Miss Pringle-Smith explained. She added, "If that charming young hostess promised to hold on very tightly, I am sure I could get her down to ground safely too on my stick." She turned to the passengers. "I'm sorry, people, but it just isn't long enough for everyone to sit on." There were tears in her eyes.

The captain looked wide-eyed at the frail grey-haired being in front of him. "I just don't believe it."

"Well then, young man, I'll have to show you," and off she went, along the aisle, round the back of the rear seat, and alighted beside the toilet door. "There," she sniffed.

Now a man doesn't reach the position of senior captain on a trans-Atlantic flight without being a quick thinker and a man of action. A wild glint came into his eyes.

"Madam, is it only that stick you can fly?"

"No, young man, anything I can get my legs round. I once took off when I was following hounds on a horse. Horse was so surprised at jumping over a house that he became conceited and broke his neck later trying to clear the barn alone."

"Do you think, madam, you could fly on your stick to the tail of the aircraft, sit on it, and fly us to the airport?"

A gleam of joy and triumph lit up Miss Pringle-Smith's face. "Of course." Then her face fell. "But what if I can't?"

"Then we are no worse off, and you can fly to the ground. Try it, madam. It's a chance, but I'll take responsibility. I'll steer you once you're up by switching on and off the landing-lights on the side to which I want you to turn."

Miss Pringle-Smith hesitated for only a moment. "Right, young man; open the door and let me out. By the way, what height up are we?"

A quick dash into the control deck and the captain was back. "Eight thousand feet, madam."

"Bring it down to one thousand, and then I'll go."

The captain swallowed hard. One thousand was below his safety margin. "Right. Steward, open the emergency door and stand by. When we reach a thousand I'll flick the cabin lights off and on. Good luck, madam."

A few minutes later the lights flicked off. Before they were on again, Miss Pringle-Smith was away. She zoomed out of the door, screamed round in a turn, knocking her hat off on the tailplane in the process, and then was firmly seated on the back of the aircraft just in front of the tailfin.

In the cabin, the captain and co-pilot anxiously watched the indicators.

"Sorry, Gus," said the captain, "I haven't time to explain, but I've either made the biggest and the last mistake of my career

or I'm the luckiest skipper ever to have flown. Don't fight the controls. Just guide them."

The co-pilot thought the strain had been too much for his boss, but said nothing. His look of puzzlement deepened while the frown of the captain decreased. It decreased until there was actually a smile on his face.

"The old witch, she's done it!" He got up and executed a quick dance in front of the engineer. "I think I'll start my own airline, with her as chief engineer. What an economical flight we would have. We'd price the big jets out of business. And to think I never believed in gremlins."

Truly, the co-pilot was puzzled. He had felt in his sensitive trained hands the sluggishness of the labouring giant suddenly relieved. It seemed as though the aircraft was soaring like a bird.

"Kill the remaining engine," confidently ordered the captain, "and set course for Idlewild. Cancel the Mayday, but ask for first priority landing. Can't have the old lady catching cold while we stack up there."

The co-pilot was past the point of puzzlement, he was mystified. "What's it all about, skipper?"

The captain in a happy and joyous voice told him.

Meanwhile, Miss Pringle-Smith was becoming confident. She clutched the smooth body of the plane with her knees, and by leaning this way and that found the balance of the giant. She found it exhilarating, but slightly draguhty.

"Wish I'd brought my scarf," she muttered. "Anyway, much better than being in the water."

Obeying the flashing of the port landing-light she brought the aircraft round in a tight turn. She corrected immediately on seeing the starboard light flash on and off.

"Oh, too much. I must be more careful next time. I like turning." She had a sudden memory of seeing, during the war, a flight of Spitfires turning near Little Muchhampton.

"Dear dear, they drop their wings to one side. I must try that next time."

The next time the lights flickered she banked the plane round, still quite steeply. The turn caused quite a commotion on the flight deck.

"Sorry, sir," gasped the engineer as he slid the width of the cabin, cannoning into the captain, "wasn't quite ready for it."

"What a wonderful pilot she'd make," declared the captain. "She's grasped the most important principles of flying first go."

The rest of the approach to Idlewild Airport was uneventful. The captain ordered normal flying routine and coffee was served.

The passengers enjoyed, somewhat nervously, the silent flight without the noisy throbbing of the engines.

Idlewild gave an immediate priority for landing. The landing-lights flicked on and off constantly, correcting and re-correcting the aircraft's course. Miss Pringle-Smith was enjoying herself.

The officials in the airport control tower watched the approach of the aircraft through their glasses.

" Marvellous to see a big job coming in without any power. What a pilot," they commented.

If they could have seen the captain sitting with arms folded behind a motionless control column, their comments would have been different.

The chief controller snapped out, " Fire tenders and ambulances on the runway."

The airliner lined up beautifully above the end of the runway, approached, and appeared to be going to land. Suddenly it became airborne again.

" That's it," said the controller, " when he bounces hard now, he'll crash." They waited for the noise.

On the flight deck the captain looked with disbelief at his anxious colleagues.

" Oh, hell, she's going round again."

Sure enough, the plane streaked silently down the runway and orbited again.

As it passed the control tower, the two officials watching through glasses dropped them from their eyes.

" Do you see what I see? " asked the chief controller.

" Tell me, sir, what you saw, and I'll tell you what I thought I saw—I think," said the other.

" An old woman riding that kite bareback, waving a stick in her hand like a jockey."

" If that's what you think you saw, then we're both mad."

Miss Pringle-Smith successfully completed the circuit and brought the plane safely in to land. The landing itself was a trifle bumpy. She had forgotten that modern airliners have the third wheel in the nose and not in the tail. As the machine rolled to rest, she clutched her walking-stick to her. Cars and trucks rushed up, and a hoard of officials clustered round the machine, gazing up at the tiny figure perched above them.

At last, steps were pushed up to the aircraft door and the captain dashed down them.

" Can we help you down, madam? "

" No, thank you, young man, I'll get down as I got up," and she sprang from the machine to her stick.

Miss Pringle-Smith, for the first time in her life, was showing off. Before a hundred unbelieving Americans, she executed a half Immelman and a full loop before alighting beside the captain.

"I'm sorry, young man, about that landing. First time I sneezed just at the critical moment. The second time I forgot about the wheel in front."

She smiled sweetly up at the tall young man in front of her. "If you care to let me, once the passengers alight, I'd love to try again. It's just practice I need."

Needless to say, the whole episode was hushed up. Newspaper editors just refused to believe their reporters' stories. In fact, two journalists were fired for being drunk on duty.

Miss Pringle-Smith enjoyed her holiday and, when the time came to return to Britain, thought about flying but decided against it as she had caught such a nasty cold on her flight out. She returned by sea, but didn't really enjoy the trip.

Awaiting her return she found a little parcel from the captain containing a battered pair of R.A.F. wings and an invitation from the airline to travel free as an honoured guest at any time she wished.

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SOLUTIONS to SAINTS WOT THEY USED T'BE

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1. *St. Jerome with a lion.*
2. *St. Lawrence (on a gridiron)*
3. *St. Andrew.*
4. *Cornwall, Brussels, Istanbul.*
5. *Electrical luminosity on ships' masts.*
6. *French military academy, British post office headquarters.*
7. *Edward the Confessor.*
8. *St. Joan of Arc; Saint Joan, by George Bernard Shaw.*
9. *The lore and literature of saints.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD *on page* 144

Across. 1, *Below the salt.* 8, *Cleaner.* 9, *Drafted.* 11, *Eyelets.* 12, *Spoiler.* 13, *Doyen.* 14, *Antelopes.* 16, *Iron ladle.* 19, *Tiger.* 21, *Entered.* 23, *Torsion.* 24, *Shifted.* 25, *Unaware.* 26, *The bee's knees.*

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YETI

Stories, legends—but nothing else?

BY WILLIAM SAMBROT

JIM McKALE straightened up under his load of cameras and equipment, squinting against the blasting wind, peering, staring, sweeping the jagged, unending expanse of snow and wind-scoured rock. Looking, searching, as he'd been doing now for two months, cameras at the ready.

Nothing. Nothing but the towering Himalayas thrusting miles high on all sides, stretching in awesome grandeur from horizon to horizon, each pinnacle tipped with immense banners of snow plumes streaming out in the wind, vivid against the dark blue sky. The vista was one of surpassing beauty; viewing it, Jim automatically thought of light settings, focal length, colour filters—then just as automatically rejected the thought. He was here, on top of the world, to photograph something infinitely more newsworthy—if only he could find it.

The expedition paused, strung out along a ridge of blue snow, with shadows falling away to the right and left into terrifying abysses, and Jim sucked for air. Twenty thousand feet is really quite high, although many of the peaks beyond rose nearly ten thousand feet above him.

Up ahead, the Sherpa porters—each a marvellous subject, gap-toothed, ebullient grins, seamed faces, leathery brown—bowed under stupendous loads for this altitude, leaning on their coolie crutches, waiting for Dr. Schenk to make up his mind. Schenk, the expedition leader, was arguing with the guides again, his breath spurting little puffs of vapour, waving his arms, pointing—down.

Obviously Schenk was calling it off. He was within his rights, Jim knew; *two months was all Schenk had contracted for.* Two months of probing snow and ice: scrambling over crevasses, up rotten rock cliffs, wind-ravaged, bleak, stretching endlessly towards Tibet and the never-never lands beyond. Two months of searching for footprints where none should be. Searching for odours, for droppings, anything to disclose the presence of creatures other than themselves. Without success.

Two months of nothing. Big, fat nothing.

The expedition was a washout. The most ridiculous assignment of this or any other century, as Jim felt it would be from the moment he'd sat across a desk from the big boss in the picture-magazine's New York office two months ago, looking at the blurred photograph while the boss filled him in on the weird details.

The photograph, his boss had told him gravely, had been taken in the Himalayan mountains at an altitude of twenty-one thousand feet by a man soaring overhead in a motorless glider.

"A glider," Jim had said noncommittally, staring at the fuzzy enlarged snapshot of a great expanse of snow and rocky ledges, full of harsh light and shadows, a roughly bowl-shaped plateau apparently, and in the middle of it a group of indistinct figures, tiny, lost against the immensity of great ice pinnacles.

Jim looked closer. Were the figures people? If so, what had happened to their clothes?

"A glider," his boss reiterated firmly. The glider pilot, the boss said, was manœuvring in an updraught, attempting to do the incredible—soar over Mount Everest in a homemade glider. The wide-winged glider had been unable to achieve the flight over Everest but, flitting silently about seeking updraughts, it cleared a jagged pinnacle and there, less than a thousand feet below, the pilot saw movement where none should have been.

And dropping lower, startled, he'd seen, the boss said dryly, "creatures—creatures that looked exactly like a group of naked men and women and kids, playing in the snow at an altitude of twenty thousand five hundred feet." He'd had the presence of mind to take a few hasty snapshots before the group disappeared. Only one of the pictures had developed.

Looking at the snapshot with professional scorn, Jim had said, "These things are indistinct. I think he's leading you up the garden."

"No," the boss said, "we checked on the guy. He really did make the glider flight. We've had experts go over that blow-up. The picture's genuine. Those are naked biped, erect-walking creatures." He flipped the picture irritably. "I can't publish this thing; I want close-ups, action shots, the sort of thing our subscribers have come to expect of us."

He'd lighted a cigar slowly. "Bring me back some pictures I can publish, Jim, and you can write your own ticket."

"You're asking me to climb Mount Everest," Jim said, carefully keeping the sarcasm out of his voice. "To search for this plateau here—" he tapped the shoddy photograph—"and take pictures of—what are they, biped, erect-walking creatures, you say?"

The boss cleared his throat. " Not Mount Everest, Jim. It's Gauri Sankar, one of the peaks near Mount Everest. Roughly, it's only about twenty-three thousand feet high."

" That's pretty rough," Jim said.

The boss looked pained. " Actually it's not Gauri Sankar either. Just one of the lesser peaks of the Gauri Sankar massif. Well under twenty-three thousand. Certainly nothing to bother a hot-shot ex-paratrooper like you, Jim."

Jim winced, and the boss continued, " This glider pilot wasn't able to pinpoint the spot but he did come up with a pretty fair map of the terrain—for a pretty fair price. We've checked it with the American Alpine Club; it conforms well with their own charts of the general area. Several expeditions have been in the vicinity, but not this exact spot, they tell me. It's not a piece of cake by any means, but it's far from being another Anapurna, or K-2, for accessibility."

He sucked at his cigar thoughtfully. " The Alpine Club says we've got only about two months of good weather before the inevitable monsoons hit that area—so time, as they say, is of the essence, Jim. But two months for this kind of thing ought to be plenty. Everything will be first class; we're even including these new gas guns that shoot hypodermic needles, or something similar. We'll fly the essentials in to Katmandu and air-drop everything possible along the route up to your base at—" he squinted at a map—" Namche Bazar. A Sherpa village which is twelve thousand feet high."

He smiled amiably at Jim. " That's a couple of weeks' march up from the nearest railway, and ought to get you acclimatised nicely. Plenty of experienced porters at Namche, all Sherpas. We've lined up a couple of expert mountain climbers with Himalayan background. And expedition leader will be Dr. Schenk—top man in his field."

" What is his field? " Jim asked gloomily.

" Zoology. Whatever these things are in this picture, they're animal, which is his field. Everyone will be sworn to secrecy; you'll be the only one permitted to use a camera, Jim. This could be the biggest thing you'll ever cover, if these things are what I think they are."

" What do you think they are? "

" An unknown species of man—or sub-man," his boss said, and prudently Jim remained silent. Two months would tell the tale.

But two months didn't tell. Oh, there were plenty of wild rumours by the Nepalese all along the upper route. Hushed stories of the two-legged creature that walked like a man. A

monster the Sherpas called Yeti. Legends. Strange encounters; drums sounding from snow-swept heights; wild snatches of song drifting down from peaks that were inaccessible to ordinary men. And one concrete fact: a ban, made by the Buddhist monks, against the taking of any life in the high Himalayas. What life? Jim wondered.

Stories, legends—but nothing else.

Two months of it. Starting from the tropical flatlands, up through the lush, exotic rain forest, where sun struggled through immense trees festooned with orchids. Two months, moving up into the arid foothills, where foliage abruptly ceased and the rocks and wind took over. Up and ever up, to where the first heavy snow pack lay. And higher still, following the trail laid out by the glider pilot—and what impelled a man, Jim wondered, to soar over Mount Everest in a homemade glider?

Two months, during which Jim had come to dislike Dr. Schenk intensely. Tall, saturnine, smelling strongly of formaldehyde, Schenk classified everything into terms of vertebrate, invertebrate.

So now, standing on this wind-scoured ridge with the shadows falling into the abysses on either side, Jim peered through ice-encrusted goggles, watching Schenk arguing with the guides. He motioned to the ledge above, and obediently the Sherpas moved towards it. Obviously that would be the final camping spot. The two months were over by several days; Schenk was within his rights to call it off. It was only Jim's assurances that the plateau they were seeking lay just ahead that had kept Schenk from bowing out exactly on the appointed time; that and the burning desire to secure his niche in zoology for ever with a new specimen: biped, erect-walking—what?

But the plateau just ahead, and the one after that, and all the rest beyond had proved just as empty as those behind.

A washout. Whatever the unknown creatures were the glider pilot had photographed, they would remain just that—unknown.

And yet, as Jim slogged slowly up towards where the porters were pitching the bright blue-and-yellow nylon tents, he was nagged by a feeling that that odd-shaped pinnacle ahead looked awfully much like the one in the blurred photograph. With his unfailing memory for pictures, Jim remembered the tall jagged cone that had cast a black shadow across a snowy plateau, pointing directly towards the little group that was in the centre of the picture.

But Schenk wasn't having any more plateaux. He shook his head vehemently, white-daubed lips a grim line on his sun-blistered face. "Last camp, Jim," he said firmly. "We agreed

this would be the final plateau. I'm already a week behind schedule. If the monsoons hit us, we could be in serious trouble below. We must start back. I know exactly how you feel, but I'm afraid this is it."

Later that night, while the wind moved ceaselessly, sucking at the tent, they burrowed in sleeping-bags, talking.

"There must be some basis of fact in those stories," Jim said to Dr. Schenk. "I've given them a lot of thought. Has it occurred to you that every one of the sightings, the few face-to-face meetings of the natives and these—these unknowns, has been just around dawn, and usually when the native was alone?"

Schenk smiled dubiously. "Whatever this creature may be—and I'm convinced that it's either a species of large bear or one of the great anthropoids—it certainly must keep off the well-travelled routes. There are very few passes through these peaks, and it would be quite simple for them to avoid these locales."

"But we're not on any known trail," Jim said thoughtfully. "I believe our methods have been all wrong—stringing out a bunch of men, looking for trails in the snow. All we've done is announce our presence to anything with ears for miles around. That glider pilot made no sound; he came on them without warning."

Jim looked intently at Schenk. "I'd like to try that peak up ahead—and the plateau beyond."

When Schenk uttered a protesting cry, Jim said, "Wait; this time I'll go alone—with just one Sherpa guide. We could leave several hours before daybreak. No equipment, other than oxygen, food for one meal—and my cameras, of course. Maintain a strict silence. We could be back before noon. Will you wait long enough for this one last try?"

Schenk hesitated.

"Only a few hours more," Jim urged.

Schenk stared at him, then he nodded slowly. "Agreed. But aren't you forgetting the most important item of all?" When Jim looked blank, Schenk smiled. "The gas gun. If you should run across one, we'll need more proof than just your word for it."

There was very little wind, no moon, but cold, the cold approaching that of outer space, as Jim and one Sherpa porter started away from the sleeping camp, up the shattered floor of an ice river that swept down from the jagged peak ahead.

They moved up, hearing only the squeak of equipment, the peculiar gritty sound of crampons biting into packed snow, an occasional hollow crash of falling ice blocks. To the east already a faint line of grey was visible; daylight was hours away, but at

this tremendous height sunrise came early. They moved slowly, the thin air cutting cruelly into their lungs, moving up, up.

They stopped once for hot chocolate from a vacuum flask, and Jim slapped the Sherpa's shoulder, grinning, pointing ahead to where the jagged peak glowed pink and gold in the first slanting rays of the sun.

The Sherpa looked at the peak and quickly shifted his glance to the sky. He gave a long careful look at the gathering clouds in the east, then muttered something, shaking his head, pointing back, back down to where the camp was hidden in the inky shadows of enormous boulders.

When Jim resumed the climb, the Sherpa removed the long nylon line which had joined them. The route was now comparatively level, on a huge sweeping expanse of snow-covered glacier that flowed about at the base of the peak. The Sherpa began to drop behind as Jim pressed eagerly forward.

The sun was up, and with it the wind began keening again, bitterly sharp, bringing with it a scent of coming snow. In the east, beyond the jagged peak just ahead, the immense escarpment of the Himalayas was lost in approaching cloud. Jim hurried as best he could; it would snow, and soon.

But above, the sky was blue, infinitely blue, and behind, the sun was well up, although the camp was still lost in night below. The peak thrust up ahead, near, with what appeared to be a natural pass skirting its flank. Jim made for it.

As he circled an upthrust ridge of reddish-brown rock, he glanced ahead. The plateau spread out before him, gently sloping, a natural amphitheatre full of deep, smooth snow, with peaks surrounding it, and the central peak thrusting a long black shadow directly across the centre. He paused, glancing back. The Sherpa had stopped well below him, his face a dark blur looking up. He was gesticulating frantically, pointing to the clouds. Jim moved round, leaning against the rock, peering.

That great shadow against the snow was certainly similar to the one in the photo—only, of course, the shadow pointed west now. Later it would point north-west, as the sun swung to the south. And when it did, most certainly it was the precise . . . He sucked in a sharp, lung-piercing breath.

He stared, squinting against the rising wind that seemed to blow from earth's outermost reaches. Three figures stirred slightly, and suddenly leapt into focus, almost perfectly camouflaged against the snow and wind-blasted rock. Three figures, not more than a hundred feet below him. Two small, one larger.

He leaned forward, his heart thudding terribly at this twenty-thousand-foot height. A tremor of excitement shook him. My

lord, it was true. They existed. He was looking at what was undeniably a female and two smaller—what? Apes?

They were covered with downy hair, nearly white, resembling nothing so much as tight-fitting leotards. The female was exactly like any woman on earth—except for the hair. No larger than most women, with arms slightly longer, more muscular. Thighs heavier, legs out of proportion to the trunk—shorter. Breasts full and firm. Not apes.

Hardly breathing, Jim squinted, staring, motionless. Not apes. Not standing so erectly. Not with those broad, high brows. Not with the undeniable intelligence of the two young capering about their mother. Not—and seeing this, Jim trembled against the freezing rock—not with the sudden affectionate sweep of the female as she lifted the smaller and pressed it to her breast, smoothing back hair from its face with a movement common to every human mother on earth. A wonderfully tender gesture.

What were they? Less than human? Perhaps. He couldn't be certain, but he thought he heard a faint gurgle of laughter from the female, fondling the small one, and the sound stirred him strangely. Dr. Schenk had assured him that no animal was capable of genuine laughter; only man.

But they laughed, those three; and hearing it, watching the mother tickling the younger one, watching its delighted squirming, Jim knew that in that marvellous little grouping below, perfectly lighted, perfectly staged, he was privileged to observe one of earth's most guarded secrets.

He ought to start taking his pictures; afterwards he ought to stun the group into unconsciousness with the gas gun and then send the Sherpa back down for Dr. Schenk and the others. Clouds were massing, immensities of blue-black. Already the first few flakes of snow, huge and wet, drifted against his face.

But for a long moment more he remained motionless, oddly unwilling to do anything to destroy the harmony, the aching purity of the scene below, so vividly etched in brilliant light and shadow. The female, child slung casually on one hip, stood erect, hand shading her eyes, and Jim grinned. Artless, but perfectly posed. She was looking carefully about, scanning the great outcroppings of rock, obviously searching for something.

Then she paused. She was staring directly at him.

Jim froze, even though he knew he was perfectly concealed by the deep shadows of the high cliff behind him. She was still looking directly at him, and then slowly her hand came up. She waved.

He shivered uncontrollably in the biting wind, trying to remain motionless. The two young ones suddenly began to

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ON SALE APRIL 10

jump up and down and show every evidence of joy. And suddenly Jim knew.

He turned slowly, very slowly, and with the sensation of a freezing knife plunging deeply into his chest, he saw the male less than five yards away.

It was huge, easily twice the size of the female below. And, crazily, Jim thought of Schenk's little lecture, given what seemed like æons ago, in the incredible tropical grove far below, and six weeks before, where rhododendrons grew in wild profusion and enormous butterflies flitted about. "In primitive man," Schenk had said, "as in the great apes today, the male was far larger than the female."

The gas gun was hopelessly out of reach, securely strapped to his shoulder-pack. Jim stared, knowing there was absolutely nothing he could do to protect himself before this creature, fully eight feet tall, with arms as big as Jim's own thighs, and eyes—blue eyes—boring into his. There was a light of savage intelligence there—and something else.

The creature made no move against him, and Jim stared at it, breathing rapidly, shallowly, and with difficulty, noting with his photographer's eyes the immense chest span, the easy rise and fall of his breathing, the large square white teeth, the sombre cast of his face. There was long sandy fur on the shoulders, chest, and back, shortening to off-white over the rest of the magnificent torso. Ears rather small and close to the head. Short, thick neck rising up from the broad shoulders to the back of the head in a straight line. Toes long and definitely prehensile.

They looked intently at each other across the abyss of time and mystery. Man and what? How long, Jim wondered, had it stood there observing him? Why hadn't it attacked? Had it been waiting for Jim to make a single threatening gesture such as pointing a gun or camera? Seeing the calm awareness in those long slanting, blue eyes, Jim sped a silent prayer of thanks upwards; most certainly if he had made a move for camera or gun, that move would have been his last.

They looked at each other through the falling snow, and suddenly there was a perfect instantaneous understanding between them. Jim made an awkward, half-frozen little bow, moving backwards. The great creature stood motionless, merely watching, and then Jim did a strange thing. He held out his hands, palms up, gave a wry grin—and ducked quickly round the outcropping of rock and began a plunging, sliding return down the way he'd come. In spite of the harsh, snow-laden wind, bitterly cold, he was perspiring.

Jim glanced back once. Nothing. Only the thickening veil of

swift-blowing snow, blanking out the pinnacle, erasing every trace—every proof that anyone, anything, had stood there moments before. Only the snow, only the rocks, only the unending wind-filled silence of the top of the world. Nothing else.

The Sherpa was struggling up to him from below, terribly anxious to get started back; the storm was rising. Without a word they hooked up and began the groping, stumbling descent back to the last camp. They found the camp already broken, Sherpas already moving out. Schenk paused only long enough to give Jim a questioning look.

What could Jim say? Schenk was a scientist, demanding material proof: if not a corpse, at the very least a photograph. The only photographs Jim had were etched in his mind, not on film. And even if he could persuade Schenk to wait, when the storm cleared, the giant, forewarned, would be gone. Some farther peak, some remoter plateau would echo to his young ones' laughter.

Feeling not a bit bad about it, Jim gave Schenk a barely perceptible negative nod. Instantly Schenk shrugged, turned, and went plunging down into the thickening snow, back into the world of lesser men. Jim trailed behind.

On the arduous trek back, through that first great storm, through the snowline, through the rain forest, hot and humid, Jim thought of the giant back up there where the air was thin and pure. Who, what was he, and his race? Castaways on this planet, for ever marooned, yearning for a distant, never-to-be-reached home?

Or did they date in unbroken descent from the Pleistocene—man's first beginning—when all the races of not-quite-man were giants; unable, or unwilling, to take the fork in the road that led to smaller cleverer man, forced to retreat higher and higher to more and more remote areas until finally there was only one corner of earth left to them—the high Himalayas?

Or were he and his kind earth's last reserves: not-yet-men, waiting for the opening of still another chapter in earth's unending mystery story?

Whatever the giant was, his secret was safe with him, Jim thought. For who would believe it, even if he chose to tell?

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OURS IS AN ICE-HOUSE, OURS IS

The modern husband comes home and calls out, "Hullo, darling, what's thawing?"

ALL IS GOLD

Only her snapping brown eyes betrayed her excitement

BY JOAN EDSALL

MISS PARKER must have sat for fully five minutes, open-mouthed, staring at the bar of gold.

There it lay in its folds of plain brown wrapping, as innocently as though it was quite usual for gold bars to arrive by post for spinster schoolteachers. It was lovely, shining, and reassuringly heavy. Miss Parker felt sure it must be gold.

It had been dropped into her letterbox that morning, plainly addressed to her in rather sprawling untidy capitals which Miss Parker felt were vaguely familiar. She shook herself back to reality. How ridiculous! Of course it was a joke and not gold at all! And if it was, there had certainly been some mistake and it was not meant for her. To whom could she go for advice? The police? Miss Parker pursed her firm mouth. No, not the police. How foolish she would look if the whole thing were a hoax and she the gullible victim. Then she remembered Mr. Johnston, her bank manager, her financial guide, and friend.

Wrapping the gold bar in its brown paper, Miss Parker popped it into her capacious satchel, which hitherto had carried nothing more exciting than school texts and exercises. She slipped on her gaberdine coat, locked up her small flat, and firmly clutching her booty—she was now thinking of the gold, with an inward giggle, as her booty—was in no time stepping briskly down to her bank.

Thank goodness, she thought, the parcel had arrived during a half-term holiday. She couldn't have gone to school and taught sanely all day without knowing more about her mysterious parcel. Catching a glimpse of herself in a shop mirror, she patted her brown hair into order and arranged a more solemn look on her thin brown face. Only her snapping brown eyes betrayed her excitement.

Mr. Johnston listened to her story with a slightly incredulous smile. "Well, Miss Parker, we can soon find out," was his brief comment when she displayed her glittering exhibit.

It seemed hours that she waited; but actually in only ten minutes Mr. Johnston was back, looking puzzled.

"Our expert says, as far as he can tell, it is gold, Miss Parker. Much smaller than the standard-sized bars we usually handle in banks, but gold just the same."

"Oh," was all Miss Parker could gasp. "Oh, what shall I do?"

A leading metallurgist, a friend of his, would be only too glad to give his opinion, Mr. Johnston said, and added, "That is, if you'll entrust the bar to my care."

"Of course, Mr. Johnston," gasped the bewildered Miss Parker.

That evening, all Miss Parker's thoughts centred on her mysterious parcel. Who could have sent it? And why should anyone send her anything so valuable? Miss Parker's only living relatives were an elder brother—a grocer, respectably married, with one daughter who had taken up hairdressing—and a very elderly aunt. Neither was at all likely to be sending gold bars through the post.

By now Miss Parker was quite sure the metal was what it appeared to be. And she was right. The metallurgist pronounced the mysterious bar to be the purest gold.

The police were just as puzzled as Mr. Johnston when they heard Miss Parker's story. No report of stolen gold had been received.

So the value of the gold was credited to Miss Parker's account, and for a week she went around in a daze, with the figures of her now fat account floating before her eyes.

Now, Miss Parker, like so many conscientious, respectable, intelligent women whom life has passed by, often sighed for the lost dreams of youth and the expensive non-essential fripperies. Much of her own existence had been taken up with nursing her aged parents, and when they died she had found herself alone in the world with enough money to feel secure but certainly not enough for foolish spending. And now all this money had unexpectedly dropped into her lap. What lovely dreams of lavish spending floated through her head—a fur, a dream holiday in some idyllic spot, perhaps a cruise on a luxury liner, a car. Miss Parker wondered if she could learn to drive . . .

For a start, Miss Parker bought herself a fur, a lovely thing of wild mink which gave her an air of elegance she never dreamt of. Then new clothes followed—clothes which breathed quality, and the most discreet but expensive accessories—things for which her heart had always yearned. A ridiculous hat at a ridiculous price that made her feel absurdly gay.

When the holidays came again, Miss Parker, to the surprise of her fellow teachers, took herself off on an expensive tropical cruise.

Her colleagues had not failed to notice her new air of wealth and elegance. Speculation was rife as to its origin. Miss Parker also speculated as to the origin of her riches but, like the staff, in vain. In the middle of a conversation, a ballet, a lesson, the question would pop up into her consciousness, " Where did it come from? "

And then the postcard arrived.

Miss Parker's heart thumped violently when she saw her name printed in the same untidy, sprawling, vaguely-familiar capitals as on the mysterious parcel. Heart beating painfully, Miss Parker turned over the card and read,

I'M SO SORRY I FORGOT TO PUT A CARD WITH MY PRESENT. WILL SEND YOU ANOTHER SOON. ALBERT.

Albert. Albert! Albert? Now who was Albert? The name, like the printing, was tantalisingly familiar. *Albert.* Then she remembered. Of course. *Albert Stubbings.* Why, it was his printing, not changed one bit. . .

It was the year she'd had to take that dreadful class of big boys and girls who mostly towered over her. How scared she was, and how insolent some of those boys had been until the day when she had completely lost her temper—something no good teacher should ever do. She had sent the biggest nuisance for the headmaster's strap and, shaking at the knees and inwardly praying she would not miss, she had administered to that youth four of the best, amid awed silence. That deed had done what a thousand words could never do—won the respect of all the boys in the class—and peace had reigned between her and them till the end of their year.

Of course, Albert had been one of those boys—lumbering, goodnatured, lazy Albert who had regarded her patiently from behind his thick-lensed glasses much as a faithful dog regards a temperamental master. For Albert adored Miss Parker. But not at first. When she had taken over the class Albert hated school and all the teachers who had successively cajoled, pleaded, threatened, bawled, bullied, and beaten him; none of them had been able to get Albert to show the faintest interest in school work.

But Miss Parker, having already heard of Albert and his painful progress, neither bullied, threatened, nor cajoled him. She just left him alone. She did ask him an occasional question, praised him when he remembered anything, however small, and exhibited outstanding patience when he displayed a complete vacuum—a total lack of the stored knowledge of arithmetical processes, spelling-rules, historical facts, and all the other information with which a school equips its scholars for whatever lies ahead of them.

Then one morning a pupil with an inquiring turn of mind had asked how electricity worked—the class had been discussing a projected scheme for the harnessing of a river for power.

Now Miss Parker was used to answering all kinds of schoolboy questions such as " How deep is the deepest part of the ocean? " but concerning the workings of electricity her mind was an absolute blank. All she knew was that it was conveyed along wires and could be switched on, most conveniently, when required.

It was Albert who came to the rescue. He raised his hand and said he knew.

" Do you, Albert? Well, come and tell us," said Miss Parker gratefully.

So Albert, haltingly but clearly, had explained to an impressed class and an amazed Miss Parker how electricity was generated, carried, stored, and transformed.

Next day, Albert brought along a working model of an electric motor which he said he'd made in his spare time. Next he produced for their inspection an electric bell, which everyone took a turn at ringing. " I've rigged one up on the front door at home," Albert told them proudly.

After that, Albert was the acknowledged expert on all things scientific and technical—splitting the atom, the hydrogen bomb, electro-magnetic fields, space travel—these and many similar subjects were carefully elucidated by Albert in his patient, stumbling manner.

Albert blossomed out. He loved Miss Parker for being instrumental in making him respected among his classmates, and no longer the object of derision.

" Now, Albert," said Miss Parker, seeing an opportunity to turn this to her own account, " you won't be able to get a good job and use all this knowledge unless you know all your school work. Who ever heard of an electrician or a scientist who couldn't make his own calculations? "

But Albert, quite unimpressed with her reasoning, had displayed as great a contempt and ignorance as ever of all things connected with school curriculum.

Miss Parker had left the school that year to take a teaching post in a training school. She had quite lost track of Albert, though she sometimes wondered what had become of him . . .

And now—this. It was Albert who had sent the gold bar. Where on earth had he obtained it and why had he sent it to her? Miss Parker resolved to settle the mystery as soon as possible.

She rang her headmaster and informed him she would not be at school that day, having urgent private business that must be attended to immediately. He, too, had noticed Miss Parker's

new air of wealth and had wondered what she was up to. However his, "Very well, Miss Parker, one of the students can manage your class for the day," betrayed none of his curiosity.

She travelled back to the school where her fate and Albert's had first crossed, and inquired of a surprised headmaster if she could look up the registers, briefly explaining she wished to get in touch with one of her ex-pupils. He agreed, and she noted down Albert's address, thanked him, and at once set off.

However, she wasn't to find Albert as easily as that. Albert's family, after staying put for several years, must have caught the moving bug, and Miss Parker wearily traced them through a succession of bored, irritable, or suspicious landladies and dreary rooms, basement flats, and terraces. She was tiring and it was quite late when at last she ran her quarry to earth. A woman whom she guessed to be Albert's mother answered her knock and suspiciously inquired what she wanted.

When Miss Parker answered, "I wonder if Albert is at home," she seemed to lose interest.

"Oh, him; where he always is. Down in that old shed he's hired round at the back. What he does there all the time I don't know. I suppose you want your TV fixed?" After inspection of Miss Parker, she decided that this was not one of Albert's usual customers and he must be making a bit of a name for himself if people like her were after him. She directed Miss Parker to where Albert would be found.

There was dead silence when she knocked on the heavy wooden door of the shed, but when she called out loudly in her best schoolroom voice, "Albert, it's Miss Parker," the door was immediately but cautiously opened.

Except for having grown a few inches taller, Albert was still the same slow-moving, patient-looking youth, still regarding the world from behind the same thick lenses. She quickly stepped inside and closed the door, looking round.

The dim interior, lit by a single naked light bulb, was certainly untidy. The four benches lining the walls were an indescribable jumble of half-fixed wirelesses and TV sets, half-filled jars and bottles, test-tubes, crucibles, and pipettes, electrical equipment, and piles and piles of scientific, electrical, and chemical magazines.

Albert was delighted to see her and quickly made her a seat on a box by the simple expedient of brushing his jumble of equipment off it on to the floor and covering the top of the box with the only clean sheet of newspaper in the place.

Albert proudly explained to her that this was his workshop and people came to him for all kinds of repairs, and he had never yet failed to find the fault and mend anything brought to him. "And

if you want anything mended just bring it along, Miss Parker, and I'll do it for you. Of course, I wouldn't charge you because you're the only one who never tried to make me look foolish, Miss Parker."

Gulping, Miss Parker eyed him steadily and asked—it seemed such a silly question—" Albert, did you send me something by post? "

Albert's face lit with pleasure. " So you got it! I always wanted to give you something. I'm sorry I forgot the card."

" Yes, thank you, Albert, it reached me safely." His ex-teacher smiled.

Then, in a quavering voice, " Albert, *what* did you send? "

" Why, surely, Miss Parker, if you got it, surely you must know. It's gold, Miss Parker, real gold. Surely, you didn't throw it away, did you? " Albert's face was a study in consternation. Then it cleared. " Never mind. I'll send you another."

" No, Albert, I didn't throw it away. But where did you get it from? " she persisted.

" Why, Miss Parker, I made it. You don't think I stole it, do you! " Once again Albert's face was a picture of woe. " I read lots of books about it, and I read all the experiments other people had tried—and I tried them all. Only every time I did something a bit different. You see, there 'ave been lots of discoveries since then that those people hadn't dreamt about. And, at last, I did it, Miss Parker! I made gold." Albert smiled in triumph. " Everyone said I'd never make money, but I 'ave."

" Albert, did you make very much? " quavered Miss Parker weakly, glad of her seat on the box.

" No. You see, it costs a bit to make and I didn't 'ave much to spare, so I just made two bars. I kept one and sent you the other."

" Did you tell anyone else, Albert? " asked the recipient of this munificent gift.

" No. What was the use of telling anyone? They wouldn't 'ave believed me."

True enough, Miss Parker reflected. She wouldn't have believed him either without having proof.

She took a deep breath. " Albert, you mustn't make any more."

Albert's face dropped and he regarded her in open-mouthed amazement. " Why not? It's not stealing. I *made* it. I can make more. I can show you."

Now Miss Parker's knowledge of currency and the gold standard was as vague as most people's, but she felt that somehow Albert's secret was dangerous. If it fell into the wrong hands . . .

She did her best to explain her fears to a puzzled Albert, and concluded sadly, "Albert, I think you'd better destroy your secret. Had it been anything else but gold I would not ask you to do this . . ."

Albert replied after a long silence, "I don't understand this at all, Miss Parker, but if you say so it must be right. I won't make any more, then. But it's a pity."

Miss Parker thought it a pity, too, but refrained from saying so.

After thanking Albert for remembering her—she wondered whether she should send him the residue of the money, but decided not to spoil the pleasure of his gift—and saying how very happy he had made her by his kindness, and promising to keep in touch with him, Miss Parker took her leave. A little regretfully, it must be said, as she thought of the fortune stored away in her former pupil's brain. She wondered if she was being fair to him. After all, he had discovered a secret sought through the ages. But, she told herself, the discovery could benefit no one, not even Albert.

"I'm sorry, Albert, truly sorry," she said as she stood at the door, "had it been anything else but gold . . ." She thought then she saw a glint in Albert's eyes and a familiar faraway look on his face.

A month later a second parcel was dropped in Miss Parker's letterbox. It was smaller than the first, but addressed to her in the same sprawling capitals. When she wonderingly opened it, there lay disclosed in a small square cardboard box a magnificent diamond, flawless and brilliant.

Hurriedly she put on her wild mink coat, locked her small flat and, diamond snugly reposing in the handbag firmly held under her arm, she hastened to congratulate Albert on his success and decided to warn him not to—not to flood the market.

"I think," she whispered to herself, wrapping her mink coat more snugly round her, "I think Albert will need a manageress from now on."

Last heard of, Miss Parker had rented a villa on the Italian Riviera for the winter. Albert has bought an aeroplane, a beautiful, shining thing which has every conceivable gadget, and he flies over to join her at weekends.

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SMASH HIT

The only records we'd like to break are the ones the neighbours play every night.

SPECIAL CURRENCY

BY BERKELY MATHER

Fast-paced new Geth Straker adventure by the author of The Achilles Affair

WE WERE coming into Alpasi at half speed. Most of the yachts and pleasure boats had either departed or were hauled up dry for the coming winter, and the striped sun awnings on the albergi and trattorie along the quay were furled. Good-bye summer. Good-bye fat fishing charters. Good-bye income—and good-bye *Peregrine*.

We tied up and I cut the engines. I said, " Well, that's it, Mr. Ashcroft. It's been a nice trip. I'm glad they were biting well for

you," and I tried to make it sound cheerful. Charterers don't pay good money to be made Wailing Walls out of.

He said, " Thanks," and then turned slowly and looked at me. " What are you going to do now? "

" Help Casey get her cleaned up and snugged down—clean up myself and then go ashore and eat something that isn't fish," I told him. " Casey'll get you a cab when you're ready to leave."

" I didn't mean immediately," he said. " Future plans? "

I shrugged it off and said something about joining my wife and newly-arrived son and heir in Belgium for the winter. It was something I just didn't feel like talking about and I think he guessed it, because he let it drop and invited me ashore to dine at his hotel.

Casey didn't have Ashcroft's nice manners. The same question had been simmering with him all through the trip, and now it was boiling over. He came aft to where I was coiling down the tail of the hawser, leaned on a broom and said, " What gives now, Geth? "

I sat down on the edge of the stern well—not looking at him. I said, " I'm giving you a hundred and seventy thousand lire and turning you loose after nearly ten years. Hate my guts if you want to."

He moved round in front of me, elbows on the rail, back against it and thumbs in the waistband of his tattered jeans. It was a favourite stance of his when he wanted to argue. I didn't, so I started to move and in doing so I caught his eye. Ever tried to send your dog home when you've been trying to catch a train?

I said, " Casey, try and understand. There's money owing on this boat for repairs and fuel. She's up for sale. It's been a lousy season—you know that. Perry's gone back to her father—with the baby. She didn't want to go but she didn't make it as hard for me as you're doing now. I'm going to join them. I've got to find a job somewhere."

Skipper-owning round the Mediterranean in a fifty-foot diesel boat like the *Peregrine* was finished as a fulltime living for a man with a family; that is, if the distaff side of the family objected to smuggling, gun-running, or even mild skullduggery. A few charter fishing trips in the summer wouldn't keep you all the year.

He shrugged and climbed on to the jetty at this stage, and drifted across towards Pepino's. I reflected wryly that my last service to Casey would no doubt be the fishing of him out of the local carabinieri tank in the morning. Ah, well—that's how it had all started, ten years before.

I cleaned up, put on my one decent suit, and went ashore. On the jetty I turned and looked at the boat. She was long, lean, and low, built primarily for speed, but a seaboat in dirty weather that, handled properly, rode sweetly and cleanly. Leaving her was as bad as turning Casey adrift, but at least she couldn't argue about it.

Ashcroft was waiting for me in the lounge of The Bonifacio.

There was another man with him—short, thickset, and dark. Island Greek or Cypriot, I thought. He was lying back in a long chair with a campari in one hand and a fistful of salted peanuts in the other. He was flicking the latter into the air one at a time and catching them expertly in his wide, gold-filled mouth.

I didn't like him, but that didn't mean anything because I wasn't liking anybody that night—not even my host, who was a decent little lawyerish cuss who would have looked more at home in a dark suit than in the white dinner-jacket he was wearing.

Ashcroft said, "Mr. Lianitides, Captain Geth Straker."

The other said, "Hi," and concentrated on the downward curve of the next nut.

Ashcroft flicked his fingers and ordered me a double Scotch for which I was grateful. I needed a lift, but Scotch was expensive. I nodded and sank half of it at a gulp.

Lianitides said, "The gentleman a soak?"

Ashcroft laughed nervously.

I put my glass down and rose. "Thanks," I said. "I'm afraid I can't stop to dinner. I've got a lot to do."

Lianitides didn't look annoyed. He caught another nut and said, "You want a job? You don't want a job? You want one—siddown. You don't want one—beat it."

I said to Ashcroft, "Tell your friend that there's the whole of Bonifacio Plaza outside, nice and quiet and doing nothing. If he could drag himself away from his nuts for a moment I'd be happy to knock his can off."

I felt like a bucko-boy trying to pick a fight, and I was creeping with the childish futility of it, but he had insulted me gratuitously and he was deliberately rubbing it in. The next nut apparently had some skin left on it because he mouthed it like a cow chewing its cud and then spat it out.

He wasn't looking at me—he just couldn't be bothered—but there was nothing wrong with his oblique gunnery. A modicum of something nasty landed on the back of my hand. I pulled him out of his chair by a handful of shirt and tie and drew my other fist back to measure him off. Bad tactics. It would have made a Western Ocean bosun cry.

Both my hands being above waist level, all he had to do was to bring his knee up. He did just that, and I thought I'd been smacked in the belly by a bulldozer. I subsided into a chair behind me, writhing and retching.

Through the slowly receding waves of nausea I heard Lianitides muttering with Ashcroft—then a hairy-backed hand was shoved under my nose. It wasn't clenched. It was extended in greeting.

I was just trying to get my reflexes working sufficiently to put a wristlock on him as a preliminary to taking a base advantage of him and trying to wrench his arm off at the shoulder when I heard him say, "Captain Straker, sir, my apologies, *please*. I am a damn fool. This Ashcroft is a damn fool."

As I looked up in bewilderment I saw him wheel savagely on

Ashcroft and yell, " Why you not make it clear, hey? Why you not say who this gentleman is? Why you let me think it this other guy? "

He turned back to me and his eyes were almost swimming—that's if two currants in a saffron bun can swim—and he continued, " I'm very sorry, sir. All a mistake. I think you are a Yankee driller this—this *gentleman* is fixing for me to meet. This gentleman—the driller gentleman—is a soak. I am not liking soaks in my business so I react unfavourable. You shake my hand, sir; I shake yours and then we have a drink, eh? "

I'm not a brawler from choice. I settled for that and shook his hand perfunctorily. It was warm and moist.

Lianitides beamed like a shark that has just taken a bite out of a bag of gold leaf. He said, " Fine, fine. Me and the Yankee navy just like that," and crossed two fat fingers.

" Captain Straker happens to be a Canadian," said Ashcroft primly.

" Me and the Canadian navy just like that," said Lianitides unabashed, and crossed the fingers of the other hand. " What ticket you got? "

" What do you mean? " I said.

" What sailor's ticket? "

" Oh, Canadian deep-sea, lakes, and St. Lawrence master's. Why? "

" Pilotage? "

The brief honeymoon was souring a little. I said, " What the hell's it got to do with you, anyhow? "

He looked hurt. " If I'm hiring you I got a right to ask."

" Who said you were hiring me? "

Ashcroft butted in flutteringly. " I'm sorry, Captain; I tried to broach the subject with you on board but you were—a little—er—well, I thought we could do it so much more cosily over dinner. Mr. Lianitides wants to charter you."

I felt like a stage manager who has just kicked the angel but I'm a heller for my dignity so I tried to look pursy. " Hm," I droned. " Well now, that presents difficulties."

" How much difficulties? " Lianitides asked.

" Off season rates drop a little. What money are we talking in? "

" Pounds."

" Thirty for me, ten for my man, ten for the boat—that's by the week. For a longer period I'd be prepared to knock a tenner off. Fuel for five hundred miles on me; after that you pay for it. You supply your own grub; we'll cook it for you. How's that? "

He said, " Call it three thousand for six months—and we don't want your man. End of that, things all right, we call it another thousand bonus."

His knee in my belly had winded me and it had been painful. This wasn't painful, but otherwise the effect was exactly similar. I sat and looked at him, then slowly swung my eyes round to Ashcroft.

If either of them had so much as twitched a muscle at the corners of their mouths I'd have gone into action with a chair. They didn't twitch. Ashcroft was just looking anxious and Lianitides was catching nuts again.

"Say that again—" I started, then broke off as the reaction set in, and finished—"nothing doing. I'm plying for fishing charters only. I don't run booze from Cyprus, happy dust from Beirut, girls into Port Said, or guns to and from anywhere."

"Siddown," said Lianitides. Only this time he smiled. "Legit, Captain, strictly legit. For why would I be asking you for pilotage ticket if it wasn't. The things you talk about are run at night and you pilot by your nose and your rump."

Ashcroft was twittering again. "Captain Straker, *please;* I happen to be a man in good standing legally and personally. I hardly understand your inferences but I don't like them. Mr. Lianitides is *also* a man in good standing—and a very wealthy one."

I sat down again. I still didn't believe my ears but there was no harm in hearing the rest of it. I said, "For the record I've got pilotage exemption for any port not specified on Lloyd's list."

Lianitides beamed again. "That's fine," he said. "This port don't get on anybody's list yet."

"Where is it?"

"Down there," he said, and waved a vague hand. "What do you say? Three thousand for you and your boat—and a thousand bonus. All running expenses on the company. Few other jobs when you get down there that you get paid for at regular rates. Maybe you'd knock up another thousand."

There was sweet music and soft pink light all round me, but I still couldn't believe it.

I said, "What company and what's the job?"

Ashcroft said, "I'm afraid you'll have to sail under more or less sealed orders. Certain commodities in demand by industry—"

"All right, skip the location *and* the lecture," I broke in. "What's the job?"

Lianitides said, "Harbourmaster and pilot—only there isn't a harbour there yet so we got to make one. So you got to know the way in to bring a couple of ships that bring the stuff we make the harbour with. O.K.?"

"I can do that all right, but I'm not an engineer—"

"We got engineers. It's a pilot we want, and if he's his own boat that's fine. We need a boat."

"You've got one," I said happily. "Only one thing—my man goes along too. I can't run her alone."

"I put a couple of fellers of my own on board," Lianitides said. "I pay 'em."

"I've no objection to that," I answered, "but Casey and that boat go together. He knows those engines better than I do."

"All right, so you take him along. But you gotta pay him."

"When do we start?"

"Tomorrow."

"Crowding it," I said doubtfully. "If I'm going to be in the Persian Gulf for six months."

Ashcroft sat up with a jerk. Lianitides gave no sign—but he missed his first nut of the evening. He laughed. "The driller I talk about, eh?"

"That and the fact that there are no uncharted harbours left in the Med or north of it—or, as far as I know, in the Red Sea either," I said.

"You're a clever man, Captain. Hard case, eh? All right, what business you got that's going to hold you up?"

"Personal and delicate. I owe nearly a thousand pounds here. My credit's good and nobody minds me taking the boat out on charter if I can make a few bucks, but going for six months is another matter."

Lianitides jerked his head at Ashcroft. "He'll fix that up for you tomorrow. Then you clear for Brindisi. You say you go there first, then you go to Marseilles to lay up for the winter. All right?"

"All right with me."

He reached out for the dish of nuts, found it empty, burped loudly, rose, and left us.

Ashcroft was rubbing his hands softly. "All very satisfactory, Captain," he purred. "You won't regret this little transaction. *Em*-inently satisfactory."

Perry wouldn't like this change of plan. But she and the nipper could fly out to one of the oil ports and join me for the last couple of months. *She* was hating the idea of turning Casey loose as much as I was.

I was as busy as a one-armed paperhanger with an itchy back the next morning. Ashcroft turned up with the money around nine o'clock—in Italian currency, which meant a sizeable suitcase of it—and I went round settling up. In lots of other ports that might have caused a few raised eyebrows, but dough was dough in Alpasi and those that had it coming just accepted it with wide grins and benisons and no questions.

Casey asked no questions either. He grunted and set to getting the six hundred and twenty gallons of fuel aboard, filling water tanks, and victualling up. He might have thought that we were carrying a lot of stuff for a run of a few days, but if he did he said nothing. "Sufficient unto the day," was Casey's motto. His home was still safe and he was content. We were ready to clear just before sundown—and as we were casting off, Ashcroft arrived with two passengers.

I looked the newcomers over while Ashcroft was still twittering explanations.

There was Olmberg, an American. One generation removed from his Swedish immigrant parents, I should have said. Big, blond, slow, and friendly. I liked him.

And there was Pete. I'm fairly good at placing people but I'd

have needed a graduate's pass in eugenics to have done a job on *him*. Greek-Italian perhaps, with a dash of Negro-Arab. He didn't seem to have any other name but Pete, so genealogy was out. He was small, lithe, pockmarked, and mean-featured. I *didn't* like him.

I grunted greetings and looked at Ashcroft. "All right," I said. "So we've got two passengers. Tell me where I take 'em to and we'll be off. I want to clear harbour before dark."

"Aden," he said. "There'll be fresh orders for you there."

"That's fine. What do I tell them in the Canal? They ask questions there."

He handed me a long envelope. "It's all here," he told me. "Study it before you get to Suez. You're going to Aden on a diving contract for the new refinery."

"Fine again," I said, "but have these guys got passports?"

"They have. All in order. Bon voyage, Captain." He twiddled his fingers at me, turned, and was gone. It was the briefest briefing any skipper had ever had for a four thousand mile trip since the Infanta said to Columbus, "Git there."

It was a pleasant and uneventful run for ten days. There's not much to do on a boat the *Peregrine*'s size once you're under way. Olmberg slipped straight into the routine I set; and Pete—fair play to him—wasn't long in learning, so I left them to the wheel during the day as soon as I was satisfied they could keep a course. Night was different; Casey and I took over then.

Most of the time we just lay around listening to the radio, trying guessing games on Casey's cooking—before and after eating; I did a lot of reading and the others played a lot of three-handed poker until Olmberg started to look thoughtful, Pete vicious, and Casey seraphic.

I suppose I should have warned them about that but it was such a long time since Casey had really got his teeth into anything that I let him have his head and left it to the others to find out. It was not that he cheated. His calloused fingers had a charm in them that just made the cards sing for him.

It was poker that brought things to a head halfway down the Red Sea. I was at the wheel and the other three were on the fore-deck sitting round a blanket. Pete, holding kings and aces, two of each, had just seen Casey for five bucks. Casey had a full house. The same thing had happened before several times, but it was getting hot now and maybe we were all a bit bored and edgy with each other's company.

Pete started to jabber some dirty words. Casey, sober, is the mildest thing on two legs. He just grinned and scooped up the boodle. Pete knocked his hand aside and started to go through the discards. That was putting a bit of a strain on things, but Casey still grinned—until Pete chucked a handful of cards in his face. Casey, without rising, hit him under the chin—not hard, but sufficient to skitter him on his rump into the scuppers.

I've never seen a knife come out quicker. The little rat was on

his feet in a sort of acrobatic frontflip that brought him a foot from Casey who was lumbering to his, and the point of nine inches of steel wickedness was aimed at a spot just above the latter's belt buckle and travelling fast.

I left the wheel and darted out on deck, but there was no need for it. Olmberg was there first, and to this day I can't say exactly what happened, but by the time I had covered those few short steps Pete was back in the scuppers, whimpering with rage, and Olmberg had the knife in his hand.

He grinned his slow lazy grin and held it out to me. "O.K., skipper," he said. "Maybe you better look after this for him. Your deal, Casey."

I took the knife and put my foot on the cards. I said, "Thanks, Olmberg, but we'll call it a day on cards for the rest of this trip. Pete, pull a knife again or start anything at all while you're on this boat and I'll tow you astern at the end of a line until you cool off. Casey, get down to the engine-room and find yourself some work." And that was it—I hoped—but it gave me a new slant on Olmberg. Maybe he wasn't as slow and lazy as I thought. Anyhow, I was grateful to him.

He told me he was a driller, and like me he had no idea what the job ahead was. Whether or not he was the soak Lianitides had referred to I had no means of telling because, apart from a bottle of brandy in the medicine chest, I allowed no liquor on the *Peregrine*. He certainly didn't look it. Ashcroft had recruited him in Brindisi, he told me, just after he had quit a job in Syria. Pete? He hadn't ever seen the little runt until just before coming aboard.

Yes, I liked Olmberg. Steady, dependable, balanced.

And so we got to Aden, and the oil agent had a letter for me. It didn't tell me much; just get on to Muscat as quickly as possible and there'd be another for me there.

There was a letter from Perry too. That told me plenty—starting with the fact that I was a no-good something. What the something was I had no means of finding out because she'd broken off in her typing and put it in inked Russian, but I could guess. She didn't blame me though. I could read that between the lines, and she said she'd be out to Bahrein or somewhere as soon as I sent her the fare—and that Junior could now say—but we'll skip that.

We had oiled and watered in under an hour, and Casey had been ashore and restocked with fresh chow in little over, and since there's nothing to keep anybody in Aden who doesn't have to be there we got under way immediately, with more than the full approval of Olmberg who had been ashore also and liked it even less than I did.

It's fifteen hundred miles up the Hadhramaut coast to Muscat, which stands in the mouth of the Gulf of Oman, which in turn leads through the Straits of Hormuz into the Persian Gulf proper. I reckoned we would do it in under five days as the current sets just right for the north-easterly run: in point of fact we would have done it in four and a half had it not been for the interruption.

It came in the form of a dirty little rust-streaked tramp on the fourth day. She was the first ship we had seen since twenty-four hours after leaving Aden, because with my next to nothing draught. I had been keeping well inshore for the double reason of getting the full effect of the current behind me and keeping clear of the busy tanker lanes thirty to forty miles farther out. We picked her up just after dawn, a smudge on the eastern horizon. I thought nothing about it until after an hour or so she had got bigger and I realised her course would eventually cut ours.

I wondered why, because there is no navigable port the whole length of that inhospitable coastline until you come to Muscat itself, and this way she was going to miss that by three hundred miles or so. I ceased wondering at mid morning when she was within half a mile and a lamp started flashing morse from her bridge.

"Lianitides to Straker," I read. "Come alongside, please."

I gawped. So did Olmberg. Nothing ever surprised Casey, and Pete was still sulking. I acknowledged on our Aldis lamp and went back into the wheelhouse to raise him on the radio; but the damned thing had blown a valve or something because it was as dead as a dodo. That explained why he was lamping me. He must have been trying to raise me without success. He was lucky to have pinpointed me like this. I swung the wheel over and headed towards her.

"What the hell is he doing out here?" I mused to Olmberg, who was standing alongside me.

"Guess he must have flown out," said Olmberg.

"Naturally, but why come out hunting for me? He knows we're bound for Muscat and that we'll be there by midday."

"Couldn't wait. The guy must be fond of you," grinned Olmberg.

I hove to a hundred yards clear of her because, although the surface was glasslike, there was still a swell on and I wasn't risking my paintwork. Casey got the dinghy overside and I told him to keep roughly where he was with a touch of engine when necessary; then I rowed over.

On closer inspection she was even dirtier than she had appeared through the glasses. "*Enodus*, Genoa," I read on her stern as I pulled round her. Somebody dropped the bight of a boatrope and a pilot ladder over from her low forward well-deck, but I had to gesticulate and cuss freely before anybody sent down a fender to keep the dinghy clear of rubbing her foul sides. When eventually it did come it was in the form of an old tyre on the end of a frayed heaving-line. She was that sort of boat.

I made fast and climbed up, and when I reached the deck I thought I'd landed on a Jidda pilgrim packet—with garlic. The crew ranged through café-au-lait to ebony, and the only white to be seen was in those of their teeth that weren't betel-stained.

I cocked my eye up at the bridge, and a character in a peaked cap whose colour I could not make out against the sky crooked a

finger to me. I went up two ladders before Lianitides called to me from a stinking little saloon. I went in.

He grinned at me and jerked his head at a chair. He wasn't eating nuts. I said, " This is a surprise, Mr. Lianitides."

" She make good time, that little boat of yours," he said. " How you fixed for oil and water? "

" I'll have another five hundred miles left in her when we get to Muscat. Why? " I answered.

" Because you don't go to Muscat, that's why."

I shook my head. " Sorry," I said. " Your orders go when I'm ashore but you'll have to leave the actual running of my boat to me. Bahrein's the nearest refilling port after Muscat—and that's six hundred miles farther on."

" We fill you up here. That's why we come out." He called in Greek and the peaked cap type came in. " Tell him what you want."

" I don't get this," I said.

" You don't have to," he told me, " but if it makes everybody happy, that damn Muscat full of oil people. Where Lianitides goes everybody get interested. I don't like that. You take me on from here nice and quiet. This ship too big—she gets reported when she go through the straits. You go through at night—softly, softly."

I said, " I cleared Aden for Muscat. If I don't show up there somebody's going to ask questions."

" Who? "

" Lloyds, who I'm insured with, and my old woman, for two."

" That's all right. My agent will fix that. I'll radio him in code to say that your orders were changed for Bahrein. You turn up there two or three days later, after you've dropped me, and there's no questions asked. Have a drink? "

" No, thanks. All right; as long as you guarantee that. I don't want the Gulf frigate out looking for me." I nodded to the other man. " This gentleman speak English? "

" A little. Take him slow."

I said, " How you carry oil? What size drum? " and made measurements in the air.

" As a matter of fact, old boy, we've got it in bulk," he answered. " How much do you want? "

I looked at him for the first time. He was middle-aged, browny-yellow, and seamed except for his nose. That was veined and mottled and it shone like a port sidelight through an offshore mist. He was English all right. Ex-gent run to seed.

I mumbled, " Sorry. Better part of six hundred gallons. But how will you get it aboard us? "

" Pipe and jackstay. What size are your inlet valves? "

" Two and a half inch—standard gauge," I told him.

" That'll be all right. Bring her up about twenty yards under my lee and I'll pass you a line." That placed him as the captain. If he'd been the mate he'd have said " our lee."

I said, " Thanks. Water? I could do with a hundred gallons."

" Through a hose. Are you sure you won't have the drink Mr. Lianitides offered? "

" No—and you goddam won't either," Lianitides told him. " Get on with it." The captain shrugged and went.

" I didn't know you'd be coming with us," I said. " I'm afraid you'll find it a bit cramped unless you're used to small boats."

" That's all right," he answered. " Just as long as the lady has a bit of privacy."

Naturally I thought he was kidding, and I let it pass. I got up and turned to the door. " I'll get back aboard and make arrangements," I said. " It shouldn't take more than half an hour or so; then I'll send my dinghy back for you."

It took even less than that. The bottle-nosed gent was good. He stood in the wings of his bridge and directed operations in two languages I recognised and several that I didn't—crisply and profanely. I wondered idly what his antecedents were. Ex-British Merchant Navy, I decided. Probably lost his ticket through booze and this was the best he could pick up in the way of a job.

Oiled up and watered, I sent Casey back over the few yards that separated us while I went down below to look things over. He returned in a few minutes with some cases of canned provisions and then pulled away for the ship again. When I came back on deck Lianitides was climbing over the rail and someone else was just preparing to follow him.

I said, " What the hell's this—? " and then stopped slack-jawed in mid question. He hadn't been kidding. " This " was a woman, blue-jeaned and lissom. She dropped on to the deck lightly and smiled at me.

Her hair was inky-black and glossy as a raven's wing, and the skin of her face and neck was startling in its milk-white contrast.

That was the first impression, and it was just registering with me when she raised her hand and took her sunglasses off. Nothing registered for a while after that.

It was like coming out of the dark and being hit full in the face with the beam of a searchlight. Wrong. Like dropping bodily into crystal clear ice-water in the middle of the Sahara. Wrong again. Like coming round a Mediterranean headland at sundown and meeting a Lisbon-built racing schooner under both mains, tops and a spinnaker.

I'm still missing badly. Let's settle for her being the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and hope that Perry doesn't read this. It was the eyes that clinched it. Enormous, and so dark that one imagined a touch of midnight purple in them. Malted, spirituous, and other fermented liquors are Casey's hobby and nothing feminine involves his emotions other than Perry—avuncular—and the *Peregrine*—professional—but this had got him between wind and water. He was handing up two large suitcases, goggle-eyed as a tuna, and only Olmberg's quick intervention saved his dropping them in the drink.

Lianitides was saying, " Madame Kyriacou. You got a cabin for her? "

What could I do? She was aboard. I gulped and mumbled something and went below and turned out of my berth. I heaved Casey out of his dogbox into the tiny foc'sle with the other two and handed it over to Lianitides. I myself dumped down in the wheelhouse. And by the time I had completed all this we were under way again towards the Gulf, and the *Enodus* was steaming in an opposite direction on a south-westerly course.

Madame Kyriacou kept to her cabin throughout the heat of the afternoon, and Lianitides slept under a tiny awning in the afterwell. Casey had descended cursing to the furnace of the engine-room because the new oil wasn't as clean as it might have been and we were having slight filter trouble. Pete was in his usual spot in the nose, catching what little breeze our way caused. That left Olmberg, who came into the wheelhouse and stood beside me.

" Nice dish," he grinned. I suppose the guy had to say something, but it irritated me.

I said, " I'm only the skipper so I wouldn't be knowing about these things—where we're going or how long they're going to be aboard—but just see you and that moron up forrad don't lie around half naked, and watch your language, will you? "

" Sure," he agreed good-humouredly, " but torsos and language couldn't worry Elene less."

" You know her, do you? " I asked.

" A bit. I'm surprised you don't. Elene Kyriacou? Or don't you go to the Greek movies? "

" I don't go to any movies if I can help it."

" She was going places once but there was a shindig over some party a prince guy threw in Rome and it kind of gummed up a Hollywood contract she was getting. Pity."

" Does your knowledge extend to what the hell she's doing aboard my boat? Or is that too obvious? "

" Not quite as obvious as it might look," he said. " I've seen 'em around together but somehow I got the idea that it's not thataway between them."

I said, " You've got a nice mind, Olmberg."

He looked at me and grinned lazily. " Yeah," he said. " I got little coloured pictures for it at Sunday school. Suppose we keep it that way, skipper? "

I'd asked for it no doubt, but I don't like being snubbed on my own deck. I handed over the wheel to him and said, " North-forty-two-east. Keep her as she's going. I'd better go and rustle up some eats as Casey's busy."

But I'd been forestalled in the tiny galley. She was there ahead of me, changed into a cool striped matelot's shirt, blue slacks, and a red bandanna round her hair. On anybody else the effect would have been a bit garish. On her it was just right. She might have picked the lot up for a few lire in a waterfront chandler's, but if she had the guy who sold them to her should have been working in

a Milano fashion house. Elegant but practical. Revealing without shoving things at you. And she could cook as well!

She had opened some cans and she was stirring a large skilletful of something that smelt good. She turned and smiled at me.

" I should have asked your permission, Captain," she apologised, " but you were busy. It is all right, no? " Her English was good and delightfully accented. Her voice had alto bells in it and something of the tide rippling past the bottom planks of an anchored boat.

To get a grip on myself I tried to imagine Perry looking over my left shoulder. When she was aboard not even I was allowed into the galley—and this vision was using the copper skillet that was my little woman's pride and joy, rating in her affections just below Junior and just above me. It worked.

I shivered slightly and snapped, " That's all right on this occasion, Miss Kyriacou, but my man is the cook. If there's anything you want just ask him."

" Yes, Captain," she said demurely, and tasted something from the spoon with the tip of a pink tongue. " Um—not bad, but it is a pity I have not some fresh pimento. Try, please." She held the spoon up to me.

What the hell could I do? I *think* it tasted all right.

I said, " I hope you'll be comfortable. I wasn't expecting extra passengers," and got out fast because I knew she was laughing at me. The only time I've blushed since I was fourteen was once when Casey upended a tin of red lead over me, but for some reason I was burning round the ears.

We were through the straits by dawn next morning and well into the Gulf. I was at the wheel for sixteen hours without a break because the straits form the narrowest of bottle-necks studded with a graveyard of reefs and rocky islands, only some of which have lighthouses, and through the middle of it runs the very devil of a tide-rip—and with nose-to-tail tankers, which fortunately you can see and hear, and ghosting dhows which you can't, the passage can be a bit edgy for a boat the size of mine.

Bug-eyed and weary, I handed over to Casey when we were clear. There was now three hundred and sixty degrees of unbroken horizon around us at once again because I had taken her out of the tanker lanes. I went aft on to the whaleback in a pair of bathing trunks and scooped buckets of seawater over the stern and poured them over me.

Just as I was towelling myself, I saw her come up through the companionway with a tray. There was coffee, fried biscuits, and bacon on it. This time I shoved Perry firmly into the background. I was hungry.

She sat opposite me, sipping from the huge mug of coffee. She said, " I love your little ship." A good opening. I grunted with my mouth full. " That beautiful girl on the wall and the so divine baby? Both yours? "

I nodded, and then Lianitides came up—gummy, black-jowled

and tousled. I was grateful because I'm not good at small talk. She went off to get him some coffee. He sat down beside me.

"A good passage," he said. "We are well up to time."

I said, "That's fine, but I think this is as good a point as any to tell us where we're going after Bahrein."

"We don't go to Bahrein," he said, and yawned. "Now you head for the eastern shore. Singeh. You know it?"

I stared at him. "Look, Mr. Lianitides," I said. "You've chartered me. I'm under your orders. You want a certain amount of secrecy about this trip. All right, I'm not arguing, but this day-to-day changing is not helping me in the running of the boat. Suppose you come out into the open and tell me just where we're going and leave the rest to me?"

"I told you. Singeh."

I put the tray down and rose. "*Thanks* for telling me," I said. "At the present moment we're heading for Bahrein. I'll go up and alter course. After that I want the answers to a few questions."

"Siddown," he said. I took no notice of him and strode forward to the wheelhouse, fuming.

Olmberg was at the wheel, Casey having gone below to the engines again. He nodded cheerfully and said, "Hi, skipper."

"Give me the wheel," I said. "I've got to alter course."

"There's no need," he answered. "She's altered."

He made no effort to move. I realised it before I checked the compass. It must have happened while I was sluicing myself. I'd handed over to Casey dead on due west. She was now heading nor' nor' west. You just don't *do* things like that on a well-run boat. I blew my top.

"Who the hell—?" I roared, and shoved him aside.

He grinned past me and said, "Don't shoot the skipper, Pete. The guy's doing his best."

I turned. Pete, grinning nastily, was holding a gun on me.

Olmberg said placatingly, "No need for this, you know. Things could have gone on nice and quiet until the end of the trip if you'd used your head, instead of losing it. As it is you've forced a showdown. Now suppose you slide along and have a little talk with Mr. Lianitides, just to clear the air, sort of?"

There was nothing I could do until I started thinking clearly again, so I turned to the door.

"The keys," said Pete.

"Ah yes, the keys," nodded Olmberg. "Just hand over that bunch on your belt, skipper."

"You can go and—" I began.

I heard the movement from behind but I was not quick enough in ducking. I don't know what the little rat used, but the blow on the back of my neck brought me to my knees half blinded. Pete moved round in front of me and twitched the bunch loose. He handed them to Olmberg.

"That's right," said Olmberg pleasantly. "Now we know where we are. O.K., skipper, you've got the freedom of the deck

and the wheelhouse, but you don't go below. Anything you want, Pete will get it for you—if we think it's good for you. The same applies to that maestro of the poker game—deck, foc'sle, and engines—and when he's at those one of us will be watching him from the skylight. Get that through his skull, will you? It might save him getting something else through. Now, skip along to Mr. Lianitides."

I went glumly. There were a couple of guns in the strongbox in my cabin. They obviously knew that because I'd brought them up to clean them once during the run. They were out of my reach now.

Lianitides nodded to Olmberg and said, "Siddown," to me again.

I didn't.

"I suppose it had to come," Lianitides went on. "Now, Straker—"

"Do you realise that this is piracy on the high seas?" I interrupted.

"It can be kiss-in-the-ring on my Aunt Inalescu's back porch for all the skin that's off my rump," he answered. "Listen to me. You've done just what I wanted. You've got me and the lady and these two gentlemen into the Gulf nice and quiet. It couldn't be done on a plane or a regular boat. I was willing to pay good money for it. I still am. And after a few months you can go back with a nice stake like I promised. But you're a sailor, Straker. You should know these things. There can only be one captain at one time. At this time it's me. Do as you're told and nothing's changed. Be silly and—" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the sea.

"What the hell have I done so far that you didn't want me to?" I asked bitterly. "I was carrying out your orders, wasn't I?"

"Sure," he nodded. "You're a good feller, Straker. I picked you special. First I send Ashcroft out with you for a few days to get the form; then I give you a little rough-up myself to see what your reactions are. I got you figured out. Bit dumb, but a bit of common sense too. You love your boat and you think a lot of your wife and family."

He nodded towards the engine-room casing. "You think a lot of that rummy down there too. You got no money. All right; give the common sense a chance and nothing and nobody gets hurt—and you've got your boat and stake again."

"Did one of your lugs have to stick a gun in my back to get that over to me?" I asked. "I repeat: I was carrying out your orders to the letter."

"Sure you were, but you were starting to get jumpy about it too. You want to put into Bahrein. I *don't* want to put into Bahrein. Next thing you might want to start using the radio—when Olmberg's got it fixed again. I wouldn't want that.

"Pretty soon I might want to use this boat without you on it. I think you raise squawks about that. O.K., now we understand

each other. No Bahrein, no radio, no squawks. You just do as you're told, eh? Then everybody's going to be happy—except maybe the sharks who don't get a free meal. You got all that?" He sat back and looked up at me.

"The lot," I told him, "but there are one or two things you've overlooked."

"Such as?"

"What we've already discussed. If I don't show up or report somewhere pretty soon they're going to start asking questions, searching for me."

"I told you," he said. "All fixed by radio. You've gone off to the Laccadives on a diving contract. Everybody concerned already told. Your radio hasn't got the range, so Captain Strang of the *Enodus* relayed the message for you very kindly."

"But if I don't show up there—"

"No radio, no plane, one mail boat in six months. You'll be reported in those waters by the *Enodus* just when you should be there. You'll even send a couple of nice messages to your wife."

"They wouldn't know where she was," I said, "so why give me that line?"

"Olmberg posted your letters in Aden. He even took a little look inside. He passed Captain Strang everything he needed when we were oiling." He leered at me. "All fixed, Straker."

It was, I reflected gloomily. These lugs, whoever they were, knew their staff work. Unless we were spotted up here and somebody got curious, nobody was going to ask any questions for six months or so. Perry would get steamed up, no doubt, but if she got a radiogram or two purporting to come from me she wasn't likely to go turning any navies out looking for me. He seemed to guess my line of thought.

"So where *we're* going, Straker, all we got to worry about is not being seen by anybody who's likely to start making inquiries," he said. "Up the east coast of the Gulf anywhere south of Bushire, there's seagulls and sharks, and a few gentlemen on the shore, very few, who mind their own business. Nothing to worry about. All right?"

I shrugged. "I'm not running my head against any brick walls," I said, "but just tell those two jerks not to start pushing me or Casey around. Tell me what you want done and it will be done."

"Fine," he said heartily. "So now we go to Singeh. How long is it going to take us?"

"I'll tell you when I've had a look at the chart. At a guess I should say about twelve to fifteen hours." I went forward to the wheelhouse thinking hard.

Things settled down after that. Olmberg was his old, easy self. Pete retreated to his spot in the nose and Lianitides lazed in the stern. The girl carried on with the cooking, and Casey, if he noticed any change at all, didn't say anything.

We came up to Singeh just before dark. I'd never been there before, and from the look of it nobody else had either. It's just a

spot of rock on the chart: a tiny islet rising starkly out of the water a quarter of a mile offshore. There's a strip of black basalt beach on the mainland and behind it the barren hills rise sheer to the desert plateau two or three thousand feet above. There didn't appear to be a blade of grass or as much as a clump of camel thorn there. I'm used to the desolate coasts of the Gulf and can even find a sort of beauty in them, but this place gave me the creeps. It was dark and lowering and utterly silent. I cut the engines to dead slow and went forward with the sounding lead but couldn't find bottom at the full sixty fathoms of the line.

Olmberg came up alongside me. "There's an anchorage round the back of the island," he told me. "Small cove; sandy bottom; just opposite the village."

"Village?" I said, surprised. "Who the hell lives here?"

"A dozen mud huts and fifty or sixty poor drips," he said. "You'll find a dhow at anchor there. Just drop your hook about twenty yards astern of her."

"What's the passage like?" I asked anxiously. "There's plenty of water here, but how about rocks when we get in closer?"

"Just stick in the middle. I'll con you," he answered.

He made a good job of it too. We ghosted round in almost complete darkness and just as I saw the high galleon-like stern of an Aden boom-dhow looming up ahead of us he called, "Right, skipper. Cut your engines," and told Casey to let go the anchor. The rattle of the chain through the fairleads echoed back from the hills that were now enfolding us. He came back to the wheelhouse and took the Aldis lamp down from its rack and flashed three longs and a short towards the shore. Almost immediately came an answering signal, a pinpoint of light, three longs and a short repeated twice. Olmberg morsed, X L, waited for an acknowledgement, and then turned and grinned at me through the gloom.

"That's fine," he said. "There'll be a couple of guys out shortly. Just stick a glim on top of the wheelhouse to guide them."

He was doing it all very pleasantly but this was my ship and my hide was prickling with resentment, but there was nothing I could do. I lit the riding light and hung it on the forestay. Olmberg turned away, went to the engine-room hatch, and down it.

I heard Casey gasp. He regarded his engine-room like Perry did the galley. He pattered after him. I guessed what was going to happen and I called sharply to Casey to come back. He didn't appear to hear me though. I shot after them.

Olmberg had switched the lights on and, whistling softly to himself, he was taking the master fuses out of the control panel. Casey gawped down at him and then swung his legs over the combing, spluttering profanity, and started to climb down. I grabbed his arm and hauled him back and Pete came slithering along the deck, hand round to the hip pocket of his jeans. It took me a long time to pipe Casey down, even then I was only partially successful.

There was a faint splashing of oars, and a boat ghosted towards us out of the darkness and rubbed gently alongside. Olmberg

came up and smiled pleasantly again, pocketing the fuses. I shoved Casey away into the darkness and said, " What the hell's going on, Olmberg? "

" Insurance against poltergeists," he said. " Even if those engines wanted to start up by themselves they couldn't now, could they? "

" I don't get it," I snapped.

" Try hard. Mr. Lianitides and me will be going ashore. There'll be a couple of guys left aboard besides Pete, but things *could* happen if two resourceful hombres got their heads together! " He clapped me on the shoulder in the greatest of good humour and went aft to where Lianitides was talking in low tones to the unseen people in the boat.

I didn't need to try very hard. It was clear enough. If Casey and I managed to jump the guard we had plenty of fuel on board to make a quick run due west to Bahrein. They were thinkers, these people. I gave it up and gloomed off to the wheelhouse.

Casey was waiting there, full of indignant questions. I told him in a few words what had happened.

" But what's their idea? " he gawped.

" Casey, if I knew that I wouldn't be sitting here biting my nails," I told him. " Skullduggery, naturally; and to be going to the trouble these birds are to cover their trail, something big."

" So what do we do about it? " he asked.

" We do nothing we're not told to do," I impressed on him. " Now get this straight, Casey. Olmberg may seem on the surface to be a reasonable sort of guy, but I've got my doubts about Lianitides. That man is tough and mean. On the other hand I've got no doubts at all about that rat Pete. He'd like your guts for garters, so don't give him any excuse to pull a gun on you. Just act natural, do as you're told, and keep that mouth of yours buttoned up. Do you understand? "

He said that he did, but I could see he was seething. Olmberg came along from aft.

" All right, skipper," he said. " Mr. L, the lady and I are going ashore now. I'll be back just after sun-up, and then we're going to be busy, so I advise you to get a good night in the sack. These two friends of ours will be helping Pete to see the sharks don't start taking bites out the boat or anything."

In the faint gleam of the riding light I saw two Arabs behind him, and they weren't coast scorpions either. These two were what Casey would have called, " genu-wine, Bedou-wine Ayrabs," tall, fierce men with the mark of the desert on them, cross-bandoliered with cartridge belts and each carrying a rifle.

I grunted something unprintable and a few minutes later I heard the splashing of oars as the boat pulled away, and a low soft laugh from the girl.

Pete strolled past the wheelhouse, the pistol now carried ostentatiously in the waistband of his pants. He grinned insolently in at us and I could hear Casey growling in the back of his throat like

an angry Airedale. I was tired. Too tired to do any more thinking that night, so I stretched out on the wheelhouse locker and did the sensible thing. I went to sleep.

I was awake just as the sun was coming up over the hills behind us. I went out on deck and looked over the scant quarter-mile of water that separated us from the beach. It had looked farther last night, but that must have been a trick of the failing light and the fact that the tide had now dropped a lot. It was a horrible-looking dump: a great slash of a narrow canyon that led back into the hills, and round its mouth where it opened on to the black sand, a cluster of miserable mud huts. I reached behind me for the glasses that normally rested in a rack just inside the wheelhouse door, but they were not there—then I saw them round Pete's neck.

The jerk was lounging in his accustomed spot up in the bows grinning at me. He obviously wanted me to ask him for them but I denied him that pleasure. The two Arabs were kneeling on the whaleback facing in the direction of Mecca saying their sunrise prayers. Casey was still asleep in the scuppers. I turned shorewards again and went on with my study of what little was there.

There was a little stream cascading down the floor of the canyon and it seemed to irrigate some small terraced patches of cultivation, the only green that relieved the drab browns and ochres of the rocks. There was some slight movement afoot: women, tiny in the distance, carrying water jars on their heads, and a few figures moving round one or two fishing boats that were hauled up on the beach, and some more round the dhow which had moved farther inshore in the night and was now high and dry above low-water mark. A gang was swaying big wooden drums up out of her hold on the end of an impoverished derrick and dumping them down on the sand. They were the sort of thing that heavy metal cable is rolled on: gigantic cotton reels about six feet in diameter and four wide. Three already stood on the sands and another two were being rolled across towards the village by groups of toiling men.

What the hell would they be wanting with submarine cable in this back end of nowhere?

The two Arabs had now finished their devotions and had slung their rifles over their shoulders. I looked at them longingly. They were modern, well-kept Mausers. I could have done a lot with one of them. I looked down the channel the way we had come in—and I shivered. It was as well for my peace of mind that I hadn't known what lay each side the night before. The water may have been deep outside, and there seemed to be plenty of depth in the centre, but there were shoals and jagged rocks there too, hidden at high tide but now revealed in all their fanged horror. It was not a passage I'd care to do again in the dark without a preliminary look-see from the dinghy. I don't suppose anything had ever negotiated it before except the dhows, whose skippers navigated by a sixth sense that they shared only with the sharks. And yet—Olmberg had seemed to know his way in.

Then I heard shots, tiny put-puttings in the distance, but

unmistakably shots. Pete was on his feet scanning the beach through my glasses, but the Arabs appeared unmoved. I strained my eyes towards the village, but nothing untoward seemed to be going on. Then I saw them. It was a group of twenty or so horsemen galloping like fury along the beach towards the village, and about a mile from it, standing in their stirrups and firing overhead as they rode in approved Deadman's Gulch style. They came on like the wind to about a couple of hundred yards short of the huts; then, without checking their pace, wheeled and disappeared up a secondary valley that debouched from the first.

Casey was awake now. He cocked a questioning eye at me. I had got no answers to anything so I just shrugged. Casey moved towards the companionway but Pete called out sharply, " Hold it."

Casey said, " Don't you want to eat? I do."

Pete mulled over this for a time and then reluctantly agreed, but he moved to where he could keep an eye on him through the skylight. For want of something to do I went back to the wheelhouse and got out the charts of this bit of the coast.

They didn't tell me much. The Straits of Hormuz were, of course, properly charted, and soundings were given right up to the low-water mark from Bandar Abbas all the way up to Bushire, but they bent round this fifty-mile stretch. It was just a bit of rockbound coast that nobody could possibly want to visit, so it had never been surveyed. If ever a place was off the map, literally, this was it.

I was still pondering over it when I heard the sound of approaching oars. I went out on deck just as Olmberg, rowed by a dirty gent in half a yard of filthy calico, came alongside. He climbed briskly over the rail and said, " Hi." I scowled at him.

" Lousy dump," he went on conversationally. " The sooner we're finished the sooner you can get the hell out of it, eh? "

I pricked up my ears at that, but made no answer. He jerked his head for me to follow and led into the wheelhouse. The chart was where I had left it on the table.

" Atta boy," he said approvingly. " I see you've been getting down to it already."

" Getting down to what? " I asked sourly.

" This," he said, pointing to the chart. " This is the whole shindig, pal. A chart—proper chart."

" Suppose you drop the riddles, Olmberg? " I said wearily.

" Aren't I trying? " he said mildly. " Listen; quit looking like a polar bear with a hangover. I'm sorry about that little breeze yesterday. There was no need for it, but Lianitides is a roughneck who just does things the Levantine way because he doesn't know any better, and that little creep Pete is worse. Me, I'd have explained long ago, but I'm only one of the hired hands myself."

" O.K., so how's about doing some explaining now? " I suggested.

" Lianitides," he said, " roughneck notwithstanding, has got

more jack than the Sahara's got sand. He's one of the four biggest independent oil operators in the business. He's on to a strike back there—" He jerked his thumb at the hills behind us. " It hasn't leaked yet. When it does the combines will start muscling in fast. It's happened to him before. He doesn't intend that it should again. This one is for Lianitides alone. Being Lianitides, if someone gets hurt in the process of keeping it exclusive, he couldn't care less. With me so far? "

I nodded.

" Right. Well, this bit of the coast is one of the few stretches that isn't under somebody's mandate. It belongs exclusively to a four-by-two sheikh who Lianitides has got like that—*at the moment*." He cupped his palm. " If some of the big boys, the combines, got wind of it, it might be different. Political pressure—platinum-plated Cadillacs to the right guys and all that sort of thing—and where the hell would be Lianitides? "

" I know where I'd like him to be," I said savagely.

" I don't blame you, the way you must be feeling right now, but what the hell? His manners may be lousy but his dough's good, and when things are going his way and nobody tries to cross him he can be generous."

" Maybe; but the fact remains that I've been brought up here on a wildgoose chase and then threatened on my own boat. What's the payoff, Olmberg? "

" The payoff's what he promised you—*plus*, if things go as he wants, a golden handshake of fifty thousand dollars."

I said, " I was with you right up to that. You've overcalled your hand. Fifty thousand dollars? You're nuts."

" All right, I'm nuts," he said. " It's true though."

" Why wouldn't he have said that earlier? " I asked.

" I put it to you. Suppose the night he had first propositioned you, he'd offered you that. What would your reaction have been? I'll tell you. You'd either have thought him nuts, just like you've called me, or you'd have smelt something highly illegal there and might have talked to the wrong people. Right? "

There was sense in that. I felt myself agreeing reluctantly. " All right," I said. " Now I'm here, what does he want? "

" Like I told you. A chart of this harbour," Olmberg answered.

" A job that would take me a couple of days," I said. " You mean he's willing to pay fifty thousand for that? "

" A couple of days, hell," he said. " A *chart*, not a sketchmap. He wants the full treatment: soundings, anchorage, leading marks."

" For how big a ship? "

" Ten thousand tons," he said promptly. " Drawing twenty-seven feet fully laden."

I said, " You *are* nuts."

" Why? "

" Stick your head out of that door and see for yourself. At a guess I'd say you'd probably have the depth in the channel at high water, but look at those rocks each side. You wouldn't

have more than twenty feet clearance in width. A puff of wind at the wrong time, a spoke too much one way or the other, and you'd be on to them. Then even suppose you got in, what then? You've got no room to swing to get out again."

"It's been done," he said quietly.

"I don't believe it."

"Please yourself about that, but I tell you it has, by a twelve thousand tonner drawing thirty feet."

"What would a ship that size want in here?"

"An Italian tanker in the early days of the war," he said. "She used to pick up oil here and refuel Italian and German submarines at sea, in the Indian Ocean. The *Maria Constanza.*"

"Then her skipper must have been a bloody wizard. I'd have liked to have met him," I said, still not believing it.

"You have. Strang. He's got a bit on the skids since then. Lianitides doesn't trust him any more," Olmberg said.

"What's this line?" I scoffed. "In the first place, if you're referring to the skipper of that tramp, he's an Englishman. In the second, the *Maria Constanza* went down with all hands."

"Strang was an Englishman until he was courtmartialled and thrown out of the British Navy for something nasty before the war. When hostilities broke out he was beachcombing in Italian Somaliland. Being Strang, he took the job they offered him and asked no questions. He wasn't aboard the trip she was caught. He was ashore sick. Maybe that's why she *was* caught."

He was beginning to convince me. "All right," I said. "If all this is true why doesn't he get Strang to do the job for him?"

"Because he's a soak and he talks too much, and he's lost his judgment and his guts since those days."

"What's the idea of your wanting to bring a big ship in here now?" I asked.

"Not now. A little later. At the moment we're sneaking light engineering stuff in by dhow, but pretty soon we'll want heavier equipment. Round behind this island a ship is completely hidden. Come in on one tide and get out on the next after unloading."

"It'll take you more than one tide to unload a ten thousand tonner."

"You can leave all that to us. Anyhow, once we're right ahead with our drilling and the new well is almost a going concern the need for secrecy won't be so great; but in the preliminary stages we must be able to keep it dark." He rose. "Well, you know the whole set-up now. How do you feel about it?"

"I haven't got much in the way of instruments or drawing materials—" I began.

"We have. Everything you need."

"That's all right then. I could do you a good job, but I'm still sore at being made a monkey of."

"Forget it. I agree that was hamfisted, but that's Lianitides. He's not a bad guy underneath and he's generous to those who serve him well. **Is it a deal?**"

"It's a deal," I said. "When do we start?"

"Sooner the better. Consider yourself free to move around as you want, although as far as the shore is concerned you'll have to be accompanied by one of our people. The locals are a funny crowd. Ask for anything you need. Any further questions?"

"Just one. Purely curiosity. What the hell's that woman doing here with us?"

He grinned. "Getting you needled, eh? O.K., I'll tell you. I didn't know the whole form myself until last night. She's Lianitides' niece, fact not fiction. This scandal she got herself into was a big one and unsavoury. She's just lying up out of sight until things blow over. Nothing more to it than that."

We discussed a few further technicalities and then he went.

I worked on that chart for over three weeks. The area was small but the job was bigger than it looked. First it involved a sketchmap of the tiny harbour and its approaches, then I had to get it accurate by compass bearings and theodolite triangulations from island to mainland to scale out the distances. After that came soundings at every stage of the tide, currents to be studied, underwater obstacles to be pinpointed, improvised marker buoys to be placed and then, finally, the all-important matter of leading marks for the ship to steer on. These last were big patches of whitewash at significant points on the shore, some down on the beachline and others high on the surrounding cliffs. Working from the dinghy they left us to ourselves—just Casey and me pulling round the harbour—but when we went ashore Pete tagged along with the two Arabs, grunting and cussing as we climbed rocks and sweated in the blinding heat.

The village was even more desolate and miserable at close quarters than it looked from the sea, and it stank of rotten fish and festering rubbish. None of the mud huts was more than twelve feet square, low and windowless, and there wasn't even a mosque there. There was, however, one oasis in this desert of poverty: a fort, square and stone built, located up the secondary valley and completely hidden from the harbour or the sea, a quarter of a mile above the village. It was to here that the cavalcade I saw the first morning must have been going.

It was a big square tower with two or three smaller ones connected to it by covered runways, the whole being surrounded by a high wall, unbroken except for a heavy arched gate of iron-studded timber. From higher up the cliffs one could look down into it. Inside the walls was a pleasantly green garden through which a branch of the stream ran.

The Arab escort was a bit jumpy about our going too close to it, and in one of my few exchanges with the little rat Pete, I gathered it was the seaside residence of the sheikh. An outcropping of rock just above it was the site of an obvious leading mark, but when I wanted to go up there with buckets of whitewash they wouldn't let me, and I had to wait two days until Lianitides and

Olmberg, who normally lived in a couple of tents above the village, returned from a trip inland.

They got me grudging permission from the sheikh, a little fat paunchy swab with a face like an obese rat, whom I had seen out riding with his bodyguard once or twice. The permission did not extend to Casey or Pete, however—only me, with the two Arabs breathing down my neck.

It was a big mark and it took several trips with two slopping buckets each time, and doing my own coolie work wasn't good for my comfort or dignity, but there was nothing else for it. After the fifth trip the Arabs decided it wasn't good for theirs either, because they squatted in the shade of the wall and let me do the last couple of hundred yards climb on my own.

It was then that I saw her.

I had just tipped the buckets down over the shelving rocks when the movement of something white caught my eye from one of the higher windows of a small side tower. It was the first sign of life I had seen inside the place and I was mildly interested. I screwed up my eyes against the sun and peered hard. The side of the tower was in the shade but I could make out that it was a woman at the window, and she was waving a towel or something. I remembered the binoculars round my neck and trained them on her. It was the girl.

The distance was only a couple of hundred yards and the glasses brought her up to arm's length. She looked like hell. Her cheeks were sunken and there were deep shadows under her staring eyes. It was me she was signalling to, all right. I waved in acknowledgment and then squinted downhill at my escort. Arablike, they were asleep in the shade. I knew I was sticking my neck out but there was no mistaking the urgency in that wench's signalling, so I decided to risk it.

I snaked down the other side of the wall and managed to pull myself up by the cracks in it. That brought me to within a few yards of her. I called softly, "What's to do, sister?"

"Captain," she chattered. "Please, please, you must help me. I am kept here. They have done bad things to me. . ."

I said, "What the hell? Doesn't your uncle know about it?"

"*He* brought me here—he and that salaud Olmberg—please get me out. This man, this Arab—" She was crying. Huge tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"I'll do what I can," I said. "But I ought to mention that I'm not entirely a free agent myself. You locked in?"

She answered in a strangled whisper, "Yes. Each night he comes for me—the Arab."

So that was it. I'm no Sir Galahad but I felt my hide prickle. I said, "O.K., I'll do something about it but you'll have to help. What time does this happen?"

But she didn't answer. She started and half turned and then made urgent signs to me to beat it quick. I slid down the wall. I picked up my escort and went back to the seafront, thinking hard.

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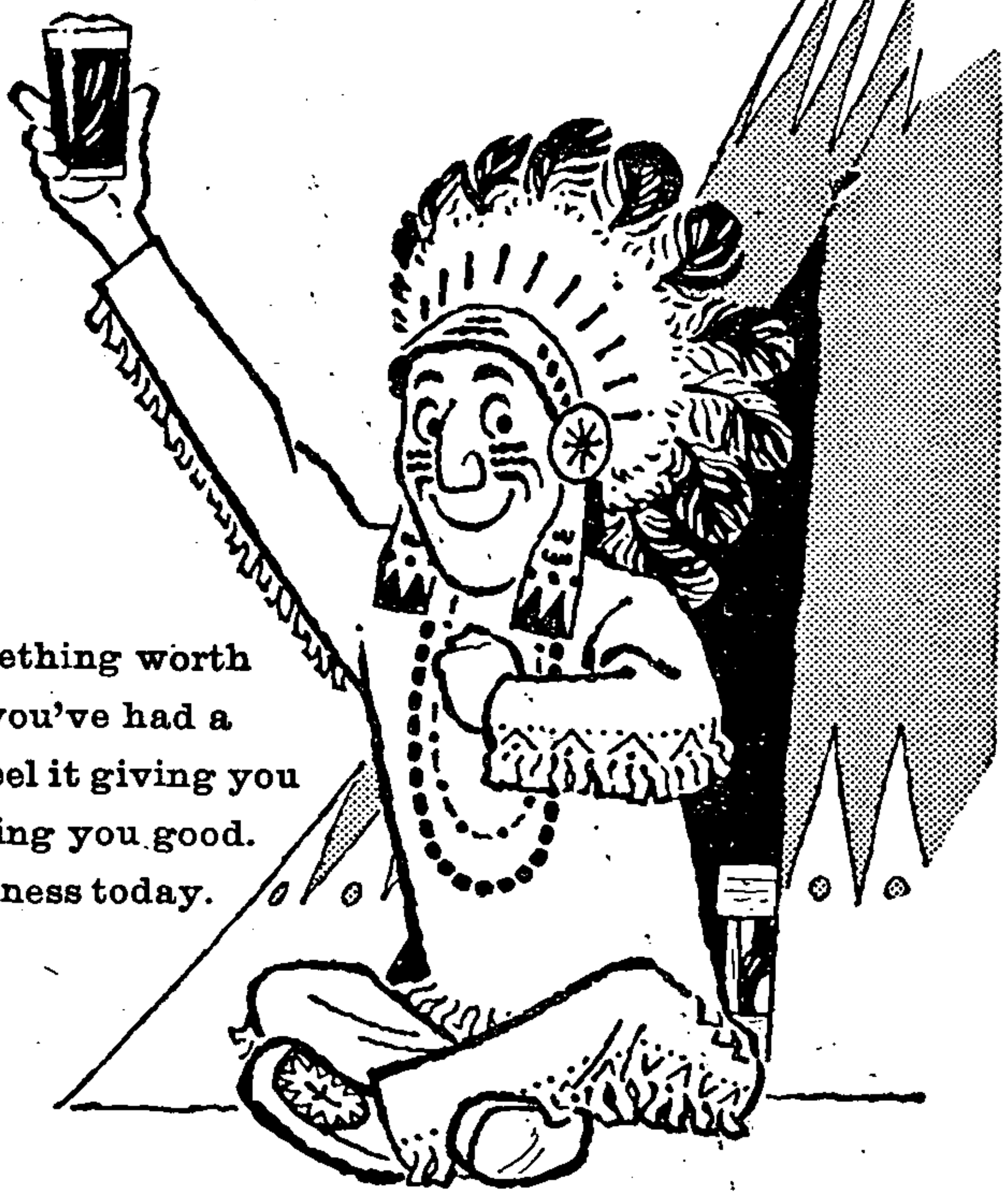

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Up till now I had accepted things. I was even keenly interested in doing the best job I could for them, but this soured the whole proposition. There was something damned nasty going on here, something that made me feel as if I'd been rolled in the outfall from this village. I wanted to get out fast, out to sea and away.

They had stopped sending the Arabs on board each night, although Pete was a fixture. He wouldn't be any problem though. I was trusted now, and the little rat just settled down and slept at night. True, they had the master fuses from the control panel and also the spare sets from the engine-room locker, but Casey could fix that up with wire in a matter of moments. The sensible thing to do would be to slip our cable after dark and slide out. Once the engines were running they'd have no hope of catching up, and I could make Bahrein in about twelve hours.

I didn't know what the international set-up would be. This place was independent—Bahrein was British—she was Greek—these lugs were, according to Olmberg, not doing anything actually illegal. Once I beat it, what would they do? Shift the girl somewhere inland perhaps, and then it would be my word against theirs. It might take months to trace her. Anyhow, who would be doing the tracing? Whose jurisdiction did it all come under? There was still slavery going on in these parts. United Nations knew all about it, and deplored it, but nobody seemed to be able to do anything about it except pass the buck. No, if anybody was going to help that girl it would have to be me. But how?

I washed up once I got back aboard, and tried to eat the hash Casey had mauled together, then I settled down as usual with my drawing-board under the wheelhouse lamp—but I wasn't doing any drawing.

Olmberg rowed out just after dark, friendly and cheerful as usual. He looked at what I had done over the last few days and liked it. Then he settled down for the evening yarn that had become customary when he was back here. Things were going fine. They should have the ship up within the next month. Just finish these charts and bring in the first ship myself to show it was workable, and that would be it. I'd be on my way back north with a poke full of jack that should make things easy for quite a long time. Yes, everything was going fine.

I said, "How's the boss taking it all?"

"Fine, fine. He thinks a lot of you, Geth. Reckons it's another medal on his powers of picking the right guy."

"Nice of him," I said modestly. "How's the lady keeping?"

"Elene? Oh, all right," he shrugged.

"Reckon she'll have had about enough of sweating it out down there by now," I said casually. "When'll she be leaving?"

"Any day now," he answered. "Maybe on one of the first ships; maybe Lianitides will get you to run her up to Bushire and put her on a plane. I wouldn't be knowing."

"Where the hell's she living?" I asked.

"Oh, we got a special tent for her near ours. Sometimes she

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goes inland with her uncle. Things are a bit lusher out at the drilling." He got up. "Well, you old sea cook, I'll leave you to your toil. Be seeing you." And he was gone, and I heard his oars receding over the dark water. This, I thought, was it. I hadn't the ghost of a plan but I couldn't sit here thinking about it any longer.

Casey was sitting on the engine-room combing, smoking and spitting over the rail. I strolled along to him. "Where's Pete?" I asked in an undertone.

"Sleeping on his lousy blanket up forrad. Why?" he answered.

"Do me a favour, will you? Go up and hit him so goddamned hard he'll sleep till morning without waking; then get his gun and rope him." He didn't ask questions. He didn't even look surprised.

He just said, "I'd be glad to," and went.

I could have done it myself, but the little creep had been taking it out of Casey horribly and I'd had to hold the latter back. I owed him that much at least.

He was back in a matter of minutes. He held out a 7 mm. Biretta and a spare clip. "Pity he didn't know what hit him," he said regretfully. "What gives now?"

I said, "I don't know exactly, but obviously we've got to do something before morning. As far as you're concerned you can get some jury fuses rigged and prime her up so she'll start quickly. Get that rat stowed away somewhere where he'll be quiet and safe. I don't suppose anybody will be back tonight, but if they do come, tell 'em I'm out in the dinghy with Pete trying some lamps on the outer lead marks.

"Finally, if I'm not back by daylight, slip your hook and get her out and then keep her due west till you hit the tanker lanes, and follow something into Bahrein. Then I want you to go to the police and tell them how we were jumped at gunpoint by these lugs and brought here. Got all that?"

"I've got it," he said, "but I'd feel happier if you'd come over with a bit more. What's happening?"

"I told you—I don't know, except that I've had enough of this shindig," I snapped.

"Then why the hell don't we just up hook and blow now?"

"There's something I want to find out ashore first," I said. "All right, Casey, just do as you're told and don't ask any more questions." I got into the dinghy and pulled away up harbour.

It was easy enough to get all upstage and navy-style with Casey, but I still hadn't anything remotely resembling a plan. The only thing I could think of at the moment was to go to the fort, climb up to where I had been, and try to attract the girl's attention.

I knew my way around now, even in the dark, and I had no difficulty in hitting the beach just opposite the headland that hid the fort. Getting up the cliffs was a bit more difficult though. Eventually I managed it but when I came to the fort, to my dismay I saw a glow of light reflected upwards from the courtyard, and there was the sound of soft "music"—quotation marks mine—coming from what sounded like two pigs having their throats slit

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and an out-of-tune tom-tom. I clambered up the wall and risked a quick squint over the top.

It was quite a party. There was a huge Persian carpet spread on the tiles in the centre of the garden, and dinner for three was set out on it, Oriental fashion. The three were lolling round it on cushions, also Oriental fashion. They were the sheikh, Lianitides, and Olmberg, and they were doing themselves proud.

They would have been sitting ducks if I'd dropped over the wall and stuck it on them with the gun—but for one thing. This sort of dinner calls for lots of service, and service was provided by half a dozen of the bodyguard, and since such things are de rigueur in those parts, they were wearing ironmongery prominently: slung rifles and curved two-foot knives. There were no ladies. The dancing girls come later, except in Hollywood epics.

I had thought of attracting her attention by throwing small stones through her window, and had provided myself with a pocketful, but this was out of the question now since the orchestra was squatting directly underneath it.

I thought this put paid to it, until the wassailing was finished, anyhow. But then I saw the servants were feasting on the broken bits and discards in the corner, as is the custom—and since there seemed enough food sculling around to have fed the village down below for a month, they weren't holding back. There's never any liquor at a Moslem feast but they make up for that on the solids, and since the party seemed to have been going some little time and the sheikh, at least, had reached the burping stage, it looked as if there'd be a fair chance of their all feeling a little stodged and somnolent. I peered round and studied the layout.

The lesser denizens of the fort—lesser than the lordly bodyguard I mean—all seemed to be grouped respectfully just outside the circle of light from the four big brass lamps, waiting no doubt for what the bodyguard would eventually be throwing over their shoulders: a few men, and behind them, huddled lumps of veiled black that would be the women. With a bit of luck this *might* mean that the main buildings were deserted. I climbed down, crept along the wall, and then climbed up again.

I was now over a darkened part of the front courtyard—a completely black well. Since, however, the outside wall was only about twelve feet high I swung over, held on with my fingertips, and let go. The damn thing was deeper inside and I thought for a moment that I'd busted both my ankles. I crawled round under the wall and came to the main door of the big tower.

It was dark this side but I had studied the layout of the place and I knew that the covered runway that led from it to the tower the girl had been in, was to the right. I soft-shoed in and felt round the wall. A little light filtering in from the garden through unglazed slit windows helped me. I went along the runway and came to a heavy door at the end of it. That wasn't all I came to. There was a character sleeping across it, hidden in the shadows at ground level, so I didn't see him until I kicked him.

He jumped to his feet, squealing shrilly. I used my knee nastily, measured him off, and hit him hard. His head hit the wall behind him even harder. As a harem guard he could be written off for an hour or so. There was no lock, fortunately, just a heavy baulk of timber across the door that fitted into slots. I lifted it out, opened the door, pulled the sleeping doorkeeper through, and went up the stone steps in front of me.

At the top was a circular landing and four doors opened from it. One of them, I knew, would be hers—but in the gloom I had lost direction so I had to go by trial and error. These doors were fastened like the one below. I opened them in turn. There were no lamps in them but the light from the garden came up fairly strongly through the windows.

In the first was a little Arab girl, skinny and shivering with fright in a cotton shift. She almost screamed when she saw what she no doubt thought was a ghost looking in at her, but then settled for shoving her head under the dirty cotton sheet.

I closed the door and moved on. The next room was empty.

In the next a dark figure was outlined against the window. It turned as I looked in, and I saw by the outline of her head and the momentary flash of the pale skin of her face that it was the girl. I covered the short space to her in two steps—maybe one and a half—because before I had completed them her nails were at my face, ripping and tearing with the fury of desperation.

I grabbed her wrists and said, "Pipe down, sister, for Pete's sake; I'm a bit late, but doing my best."

It stopped her scratching, but it didn't do much else to help. She just went slack at the knees and folded up. Maybe you couldn't blame her. I had no means of knowing just what she'd been through, and quite frankly I didn't even want to hazard a guess. All I wanted to do was to get her out of it—fast.

I pulled her up roughly and said, "Get a grip on yourself."

She rallied a bit but she was still shivering like a leaf. I pushed her away and looked at her. She was in a flimsy shift thing like the one the kid was wearing in the other room, and like her she was barefooted. It didn't look too promising for a stiff cliff climb but there was no time to think of that now. I took her by the hand and led her out. Down at the bottom of the stairs I found the guard's slippers neatly parked on the step, but they were too big for her to keep on so were worse than useless.

We came out into the courtyard and I left her in a dark corner and circled round looking for a way out. And I found one. The main gate itself. It was fastened like the doors with a baulk of timber, but here again there was a sleeping guard. I was ready for this one though. He didn't know anything about it at the time.

So far so good. The opposition had been sitters up till now. But it was too easy to last. One of the bodyguard came round the corner just as I was going back for her. The light from the garden was on me at this point. The man stood stock still for a moment, no doubt thinking that I was another invited guest,

but then he must have had second thoughts. He rushed at me, baying like a bird-dog and unslinging his rifle from his robe when he came up with me, so he was easy—but the damage was done.

The music stopped and I heard voices raised in a questioning babel. I grabbed the girl and dragged her after me and we flew through the gate and down the slope in front of it to the edge of the cliff. Maybe we had thirty seconds start; certainly no more.

At the edge of the cliff I dropped flat and pulled her down with me and watched as the mob came howling through the main gate. Outside in the darkness they pulled up uncertainly, then with heart-stopping relief I saw that some quickthinker had thought of lights. He came out behind the others waving one of the brass lamps. That sort of light in those circumstances hampers the pursuers more than the pursued, because it rings them in a circle which throws the outer gloom into even greater darkness and makes shadows jump deceivingly.

I knew it wouldn't last long but it was a breather until they started to fan out and comb the ground between the cliff edge and the fort. I whispered, "There's a hard climb down behind us and a boat at the bottom. Do you think you could have a go at it by yourself while I stay here and try to hold them off?"

She said, "I'll try." I guided her over and hoped for the best.

The din was hellish. Everybody yelling in Arabic at once, and the bodyguard loosing off shots at random just to show their boss how keen they were—but tending, thank whatever gods there be, to follow the lampbearer. He had firm ideas of his own and he set off down the track towards the village.

For a moment I had wild hopes that he'd lead the whole field away from us, but now another factor entered into it. Someone had produced an electric torch and it was combing the ground between the gate and me, and doing it systematically. I lay flat, hardly daring to breathe—then inevitably it picked me up.

Olmberg's voice said, "All right, Straker. Get up and put your hands over your head."

He seemed to be alone, the field now all tearing away to a flank. I got up. The light came slowly towards me. He said, mildly and still as friendly as ever, "What the hell's the idea? If you'd wanted an in on the party, all you'd have had to do was to have acted a little more friendly instead of glooming out there on your own. Lianitides isn't going to like this. The local straw boss is hard enough to humour as it is."

I said, "I don't go for white-slaving, Olmberg."

"Somebody's been talking, have they? Forget it. Water under the bridge. When you buy concessions in this part of the world you've got to use the currency the seller calls. That little tramp has been around. Nothing new to her. Hell, it's a break for her." He was still coming towards me. "Well, kind of lucky you've finished the charts, all but, isn't it?"

I said, "In a kind of a way, no doubt," and added, "don't knife the driller, Casey. He's doing his best."

His own corny gag but, by the sweet little cherub that sits up aloft and looks after fools like me, it worked. Only for a split second, but long enough. The light jerked off me, then swung back. He was laughing. I brought down the gun which I was holding behind my head and shot twice. He stopped laughing.

I heard the mob give tongue and come surging back as I climbed over the edge. I let myself slide over the first sloping bit, and then just as it dropped sheer I hit her, clinging to the face of the rock. I grabbed her instinctively and we plummeted down together—there was a shock that knocked the breath out of me as we hit the sand. She was out cold now, and I was next door to it, but I gathered enough strength and savvy to leave her where she was and go looking for the boat.

It wasn't far away, and I had carried her to it by the time the first of them slithered down on to the beach. The leaders had their fingers over the stern just as we got afloat. I fired blindly at them and there was an answering fusillade from the beach. The rounds flew past us but the cherub was still on the ball. We made it to the *Peregrine* in something of an anticlimax, and Casey had us under way in minutes after we climbed over the rail.

It was high water and the passage out was easy. . .

I'm back now in Alpasi. Summer is on us again and the season looks as if it's going to be a good one. Perry says we ought to be ashore, with me in a regular job and not seagoing-hoboing any longer—and when Junior is ready for school it's going to be just that way. In the meantime they're both loving it.

Lianitides is sweating it out in a Persian gaol, and so, I understand, is the sheikh; the former for conspiracy to tap one of their pipelines up in the hinterland of the latter's realm and milk off oil into a fleet of semi-derelict tankers he had bought for the purpose, through nylon pipes he had been importing in dhows for months. There were a couple of venal officials, both government and company, in it, and the tortuous roots of graft ran deep.

Each was to be paid in the currency he called. The sheikh called for something he had seen in an old Italian film magazine and "Uncle" Lianitides, that universal provider, had supplied it. He had told her he had gone into the film business and was coming down here to pick out a location for a desert epic—sheikhs, dancing girls, and all—and how would the leading lady like to see the place before the camera unit arrived?

Yes, she was as dumb as that, poor kid.

Still, I split the reward money with her, and she's back in circulation again. We saw her on television the other night. Perry said she didn't look as if she had much intellect.

I said, "Maybe; but, honey, how that gal could cook."

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ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

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Solution on Page 92

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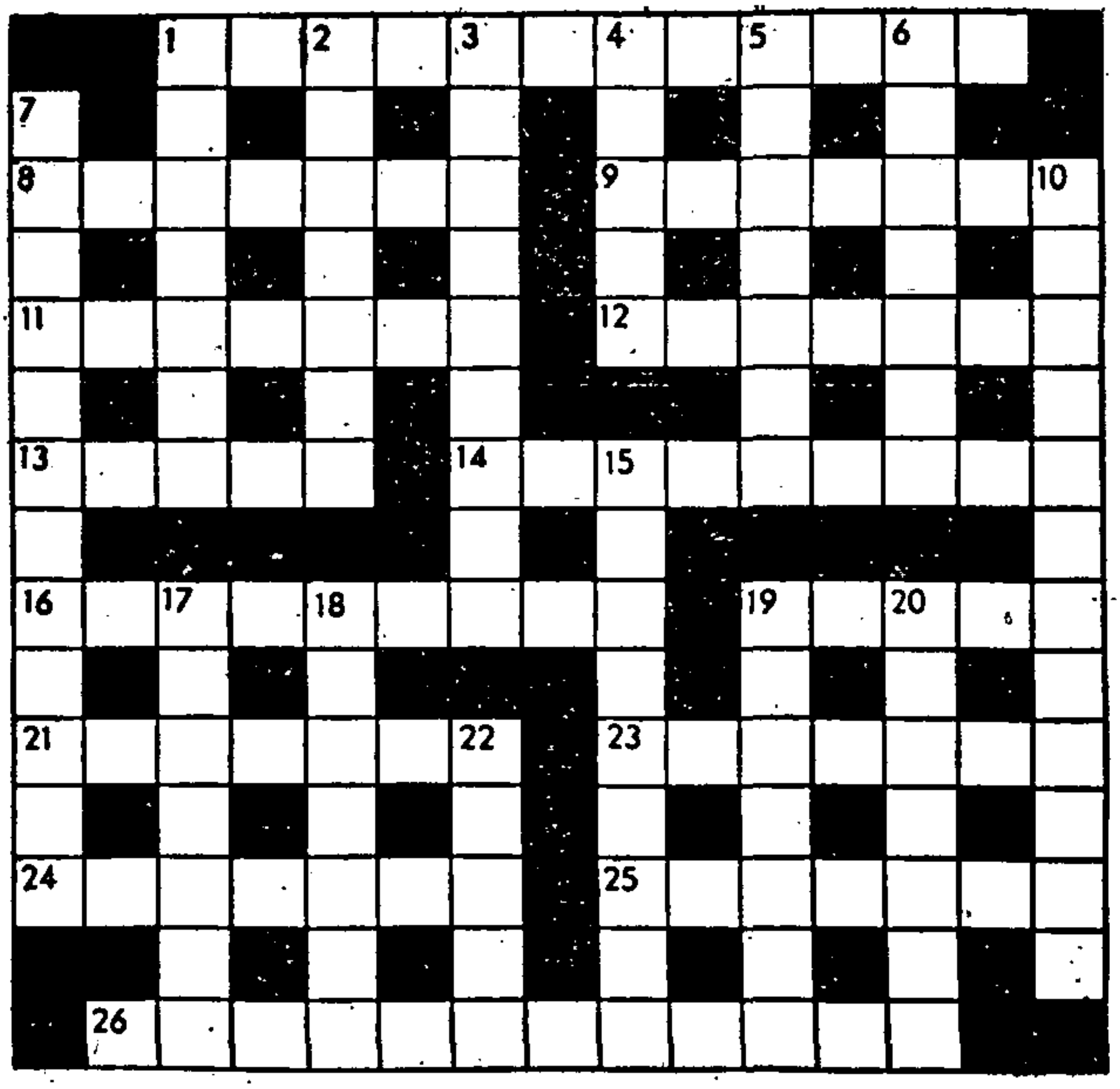

CLUES

Across

1 Sounds definitely lower-deck (5, 3, 4).

8 Hundred thinner for Mrs. Mopp (7).

9 Edward called up into Air Force with a penny (7).

11 Holes or tiny pupils? (7).

12 He's after loot (7).

13 Ditto with an urge for senior (5).

14 Insect departs in deer (9).

16 Aiken Drum's instrument maybe (4, 5).

19 Nigerian lady's mount (5).

21 In ledger or St. Leger ? (7).

23 It's a real twist (7).

24 Moved behind the scenes (7).

25 Unconscious girl and merchandise (7).

26 These joints are the cat's pyjamas (3, 4, 5).

Down

1 Wry beer made here (7).

2 It may be dark or magic (7).

3 Working party ? No, brass ! (5, 4).

4 Plain hell about shade (5).

5 To set Thames on fire ? (3, 4).

6 " Which for this nineteen years we have —— ——" (Shakespeare) (3, 4).

7 Tools, or miser's clubs ? (12).

10 Othello meeting Desdemona ? (4, 8).

15 Pack for forest holiday ? (4, 5).

17 He'll swallow anything ! (7).

18 A dripping barrel ? (4, 3).

19 Row in meter races (7).

20 Segovia's choice (7).

22 She can do *arid* die ! (5).

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